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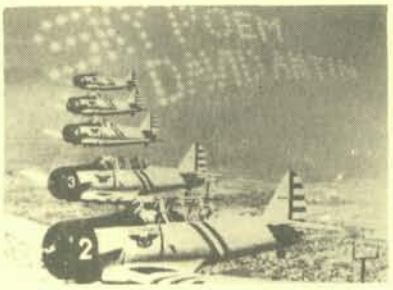

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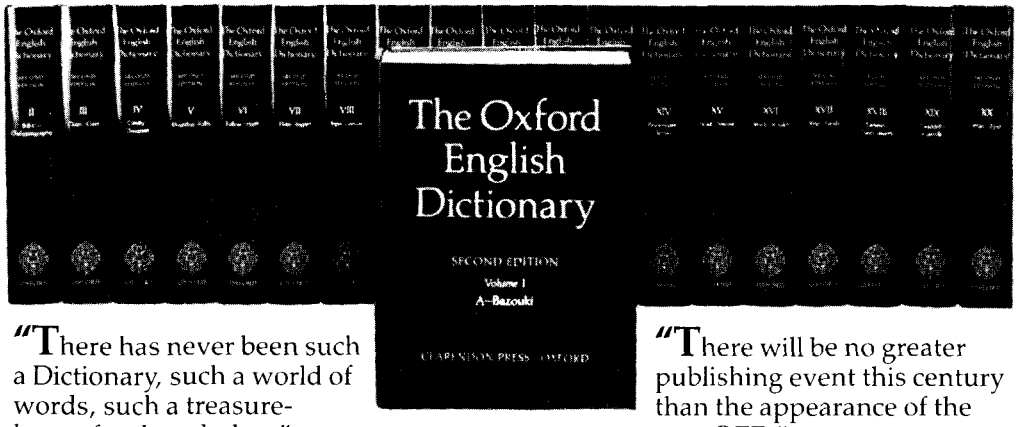


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## Waiter, There's a Paragraph in My Soup!

ARISTIDES

*Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or, like the ambitious, for instruction. No, read in order to live.*
—Flaubert

George Bernard Shaw, who in a long life said so many things, said that "[I] could remember no time at which a page of print was not intelligible to me, and can only suppose I was born literate." I wish I could suppose the same — I wish, now that I am at it, that I could have called Shaw "Bernie," which might have taken a bit of the helium out of him — but I cannot. I can recall, quite precisely, the excitement of learning to sound out words on the page and that the page in question was one from the Sunday comics, or what used to be called "the funny papers." I can recall as well the time when it began to be clear that reading would be not only a source of heightened pleasure for me but indubitably the central experience in my life. In fact, I tend to spend something on the order of five hours each day reading. By my rough calculations, this means that, if I live on to my middle seventies, I shall have spent something like eleven and a half years, of twenty-four-hour days, with a book or magazine in my hands.

It would be more if I hadn't come to books rather late in life. When I did I was already twenty and precocious in the ways of the world while retarded in those of the mind. Reading reports about the shameful condition of our schools, I smile the furtive smug little smile of the man who has gotten away with something. When I learn that only a very small percentage of seventeen-year-olds in America have read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, or know why *The Federalist* was written, or can locate Yugoslavia, Greece, and France on a blank map, I confess that I neither did nor knew how to do any of those things at seventeen, and I am none too confident about other such items that appear in these reports now that I am fifty-two. An extremely happy childhood in which books played almost no part and an indolent adulthood of the most desultory reading have made this possible.

My passion for reading showed up in the dark winter of my junior year at the University of Chicago. That winter, because all my classes met in the morning hours, I decided to sleep days and stay up nights, on the model, I subsequently learned, of George Sand. I would return from class at eleven A.M. and sleep until dinner at six or so. After dinner I played poker or gin, watched television, went to the movies, schmoozed, and engaged in other such character-building activities until nearly midnight. Then, when everyone else had turned in, I spent three or so hours doing my various school assignments. That left four or five utterly quiet, altogether solitary, absolutely delicious hours for reading exactly what I pleased.

What I pleased to read was not all that elevated. Elevation to heights where oxygen equipment would come in handy was already available in the classroom, for the curriculum of the University of Chicago offered only great books for study. I had no argument with that; I still don't. But I, for my own personal reasons, had a simultaneous hunger for merely good books and even for a few rubbishy ones. So there I sat, in a small but immensely comfortable armchair purchased for five bucks from the Salvation Army, in my robe, a blanket over my lap, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee or Pepsi-Cola, reading the novels of John O'Hara, Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, Henry Miller (in the plain green paperback covers provided by the Olympia Press), J. D. Salinger, Truman Capote, and I forget what others, awaiting the sunrise, feeling flat out, deliriously, pig-heaven happy.



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The hook was in, deep down, permanently planted. Henceforth one of my life's perennial problems was how to clear a decent bit of time for that lovely, anti-social, splendidly selfish habit known as reading. In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James remarks that "the period between twenty and thirty is the critical one in the formation of intellectual and professional habits," which certainly proved true in my case. I was fortunate in being able to indulge my newfound habit in a big-time way by being drafted for two years in the peacetime army, where reading, in the fastnesses of army posts in Texas and Arkansas, seemed far and away the best if not the only game in town. Early in my time in the army — in, specifically, basic training — no books, magazines, even newspapers were allowed, and, though this lasted only eight weeks, I can distinctly recall feeling it as a genuine deprivation, like withdrawal from cigarettes or sweets. Later in the army I found myself living alone with occasional stretches of seventy-two hours with no responsibilities and no money for sporting diversions and nothing else to do but read, which I did, at three- and four-hour uninterrupted clips. Too much of a good thing? William James, in his chapter on habit in *The Principles of Psychology*, suggests that "even the habit of excessive indulgence in music, for those who are neither performers themselves nor musically gifted enough to take it in a purely intellectual way, has probably a relaxing [by which James meant a *bad*] effect upon the character." But I took care of this little problem by determining to become a writer. No other occupation, after all, would begin to justify such a voracious appetite for reading.

Not long after this decision, I moved to New York, which, say whatever you like against it, is a fine town for reading. What makes it so fine is that New York has the best bookstores; better yet, the best used-book stores; the greatest availability of serious magazines and journals — and all of this in the most generous abundance. Shortly after I arrived in New York, I found a shop near the public library that sold back issues of *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*, and some days, rather than look for a job, I took five or six such back issues to the park and read the day away. Later, when I found a job, it turned out to be near lower Fourth Avenue, which in those days had an impressive array of used-book stores. Walking along Fourth Avenue, I always felt like a sailor in port at Macao; temptation lurked everywhere, and so, prudent fellow that I was, I often left my wallet in my desk back at work, lest I blow money meant for telephone and electric bills on, say, a complete set of John Ruskin. A hazardous city for an innocent reader, New York.

While living in New York I acquired the habit of rarely going out without tucking a book or magazine under my arm. Vibrant and fascinating though New York can be, it has so many parts and patches that are best read through: riding subways, standing in bank lines, arranging any sort of bureaucratic business, sitting through traffic jams. New York probably offers more good reasons to avert one's eyes than any other city in America, and where better to avert them than into a book? To this day, though long removed from New York, I still usually walk about with a book in hand, and I keep a book or two in my car, often getting in a quick paragraph at a stoplight. If you happen to be behind me, please don't honk when the light turns green, for I could be coming to the end of a paragraph.

Sometime in my middle twenties I began to review books, which, as a reader, I looked upon as the equivalent in sports of turning pro. The notion of being paid for reading was exhilarating. To be sure, the money was poor, but the hours were long and the fame almost yet not quite fleeting. As a youthful book reviewer, I was apparently able to do a convincing impression of an intelligent and cultivated fellow, and so I was soon asked to review books intrinsically much more serious than I was. Would I care to review the most recent volume of Bertrand Russell's autobiography? Yes, I rather should. An English translation of Thomas Mann's letters is about to be published, and would I be interested in writing about it? Actually, I would. The memoirs in four volumes of Alexander Herzen have appeared, and did I have time to read and write about them? Not, I allowed, a problem. (Who, exactly, was Alexander Herzen, I recall thinking after agreeing to write about him, and I rushed to an encyclopedia to find out.) Yet I worked hard on these reviews, reading lots of other books in connection with them, in no small measure because I was fearful of making a jackass of myself by committing



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some horrendous error. This, I believe, is what is known as getting one's education in public. Whether it is also known as fraud is a question I prefer to let pass.

As a reviewer, I took notes on my reading and made light vertical pencil markings alongside pertinent passages that I wanted either to quote or to reread. It was all a bit like being a student again, which was not my idea of a jolly good time. One of the reasons I was so eager to be out of school — and knew with a certainty that graduate school was not for me — was my ardor to read what I wished and in precisely the way I wished to read it: not to read for examination or to acquire someone else's sense of a book. My temperament led me away from concentrated study. An expert — on anything — was the last thing I wished to become. If not in life then at least among books, I was a born roamer. Boswell reports that Samuel Johnson's mind was "more enriched by roaming at large in the fields of literature, than if it had been confined to any single spot," adding that "the flesh of animals who feed excursively, is allowed to have a higher flavour than that of those who are cooped up." If desultory reading was good enough for the Doc, I figure it is plenty good enough for me.

But to read desultorily, to be an intellectual roamer and grazer, luxurious though the freedom of it is, carries its own complications. Certain reading habits require a commensurate reading habitat. Multiple have been the definitions of the intellectual, that professional dilettante, but any realistic definition should include the unfailing identifying mark of his living amidst a vast welter of paper. In the abode of the intellectual, books, magazines, newspapers are everywhere. The splendidly sensible Sydney Smith, in composing a sketch for a cheerful room, suggests that tables "should be strewn with books and pamphlets," but he elsewhere warned that, to preserve oneself from becoming completely swamped by books, one should never "suffer a single shelf to be placed in [a room]; for they will creep round you like an erisypelas till they have covered the whole."

In my own apartment, books and magazines are currently in every room, including the kitchen. I am married to a woman whose tolerant love for her husband has caused her to repress her natural (and quite reasonable) penchant for order, which I try, with uneven success, to respect. I shiver at the thought of what my apartment would resemble if I lived alone. Harry Wolfson, the great Harvard intellectual historian, who was a bachelor and a man of wide interests, is said to have kept books in his refrigerator. A pity microwave ovens weren't in wide use in Wolfson's day — he died in 1974 — for it would have perfectly accommodated his Loeb Classics.

The home of any serious desultory reader has to be a shambles of odd reading matter, chiefly because such a reader has no useful principle of exclusion. By the very nature of his reading, his interests tend to widen not to narrow, to exfoliate endlessly, like a magical rose. Ten or so years ago I could have confidently said that I had no interest, as a reader, in space travel. I have since taken a very elementary course in astronomy, and so books on space and astronomy come into our apartment as does a subscription to *Astronomy Magazine*. A recent trip to Italy has brought modern Italy into the already crowded list of subjects I now read about regularly. An essay in the British magazine *Encounter* on a writer I had not hitherto heard of named Julian Jaynes caused me to acquire a copy of Jaynes's book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. It begins brilliantly. Another bookmark in yet another book; another book atop yet another pile of books — one of several — with bookmarks in them. It is endless, absolutely endless — and I must confess that I wouldn't have it any other way.

Having too much to read isn't the worry; having too little to read has been on occasion. In paucity, never profligacy, lies fear. Sir James Mackintosh, the journalist and jurist who wrote for the *Edinburgh Review*, used to travel around the country with so many books in his carriage that he couldn't pull down the windows. S. N. Behrman, the American playwright and memoirist, used to travel with a portable library, a smallish leather case that contained twenty-five or thirty books. To people who do not require ample dosages of print, taken daily, this will seem excessive, even foolish. I myself think it shows eminent good sense. Abroad, in the town of Ravenna, I had read my way through the books in English that I had brought along. Sheer panic set in. I discovered a shop off the Piazza del



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Popolo that sold British paperbacks. I bought two novels of the insufficiently amusing British novelist Simon Raven, at the scandalous price of ten dollars a shot, which at least calmed me down until I returned home.

I don't mean to imply that anything at all will satisfy my hunger for reading. I have never, for example, been able to read detective stories or spy thrillers, no matter how elegantly composed, though I enjoy both kinds of story in the movies or on television (which I often watch with a book or magazine in hand). Wherever possible I prefer books that amuse me; this comes down to meaning books that were written with style. I would rather read a stylish book than a style-less more scholarly book on the same subject. I have of late been reading Sacheverell Sitwell's *Liszt*. Doubtless more serious books on Liszt have been written; it is doubtful that I shall read another full book on Liszt in my lifetime. Yet Sachie, as Sitwell's friends called him, seems to me to have written a fine book because he knew what was interesting in life, knew how to tell an anecdote well, knew how to put a lot of spin on his sentences. He was, in two words, no dope. I prefer not to read dopes. I prefer to read writers who know more about the world than I do, and to steer clear of those who know less. I discover more of the latter as I grow older, but the growth of my own wisdom is not proceeding at so alarming a rate that I fear running out of things to read.

Although reading is a solitary act, it need not be done in isolation from other acts. In his chapter on habit, William James cites a man named Robert Houdin who could read while juggling four balls. (I assume he wasn't reading Immanuel Kant.) A husband and wife conversing behind their separate sections of newspaper over breakfast is an old cartoon set piece. Lots of people — I am among them — read while watching television, sometimes during commercials or through the more trivial news items or awaiting a weather report or sports scores. Reading while watching baseball on television is especially fine and, given light reading, is easily brought off with the help of instant replay. Why do one thing at a time when you can do two? And between the two done simultaneously, light reading and watching television, the former almost always wins out.

People commonly read while bathing and sunbathing. In my time I have done a good bit of both, but I may have been pushing it when in my early twenties I brought a copy of *The New Yorker* to read in a steam bath. It was in fact my first visit to a steam bath, and once inside I proceeded to clamber to the topmost bench, nearest the ceiling, whence the heat exuded. I must have been sitting there reading *The New Yorker*'s racing writer Audax Minor no longer than three or four minutes when I felt an odd pulsating in my forehead. I touched my hand to it and discovered a good-sized vein. I next looked down to find that one of the pages of the magazine had ravelled itself round my wrist, the humidity in the room causing it to cling to my forearm. Head pulsating, arm now wrapped in dampened slick paper, body wound in a sheet, in panic I fled, never again to make the mistake of treating a *shvitzbud* as a substitute for the Reading Room of the British Museum.

Reading not in the bath but in the bathroom is a subject that, in any earnest survey of reading habits, cannot be avoided. ("It's alimentary, my dear Watson.") Recently asked for permission to reprint an essay I had written, I in turn, never shy of the vulgar question, asked if there was a reprint fee provided. There was none, I was told by the editor, but he hastened to add that his journal was ardently read by its subscribers. "Really," he said, "they take it to the john." I had not hitherto thought of that as a standard, but it is unquestionably true that one tends to take only reading matter that one is genuinely interested in to the bathroom. (The same goes for the hospital.) Whether an author thinks it beyond the dignity of his work to have it read in the bathroom is another question. As a bathroom reader myself, I should feel honored to have others read me in the room that the English, in a notable euphemism, used to call "the House of Commons."

Books for bathroom reading oughtn't be too heavy, in any sense of the word — neither too large nor too densely argued. What is wanted is writing that can be read in short takes, easily abandoned and returned to at a later time without losing the thread. Diaries and journals and collections of letters fill the bill nicely; so do wittily written novels of modest length. I read a volume of Tocqueville's letters in the bathroom; I am currently reading selections from James Agate's amusing diary (*The Selective Ego*); and some years ago, over a two-year stretch, I read through the twelve



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slender novels that comprise Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*. More recently, I read three volumes of Frank Sullivan's humorous writings, and I continue to read, intermittently, two books by Arthur Koestler on scientific subjects: *The Case of the Midwife Toad* and *The Watershed*, a biography of Johannes Kepler. But then everyone will have his own notions about what makes for the most commodious reading.

Reading while eating has its own complexities. Eating alone, especially in a restaurant, one's solitude seems redoubled. One notices, as one rarely does when dining in company, the lengthiness and noisiness of one's chewing, the slight awkwardness with which one handles one's cutlery, one's ineptitude with lettuce. Dining in solitude renews one's sense of the necessity of company to the enjoyment of food. A book at the side or in front of one's plate takes one's mind off all that, serving as a screen against the public when dining out, as a companion when dining alone in one's own home. I do not like to eat in restaurants when I am alone, and avoid it whenever I can, but when I cannot I always come armed with a book or magazine. I eat most of my lunches alone, at home, and automatically pick up something to read while eating lunch.

Here the problem is never what to read but what to eat — more specifically, what kind of food can be efficiently eaten while reading. (Taking the opposite tack, Edmund Wilson once remarked that the Marquis de Sade was the only writer he couldn't read along with his breakfast.) Soup, for example, is very poor stuff while reading. Not only does it require concentration on its own, not only is it potentially messy, but it doesn't allow one much pause between spoonfuls to read a paragraph or so. Of more solid foods, pastas, stews, club and other sandwiches that require two hands to manipulate are rather more than is wanted. A plain cutlet is nice, or a cold breast of chicken; so is cheese (if you can afford the cholesterol) and fruit — one takes a bite of food, chews deliberately, reads a paragraph, returns to the plate, and then returns to the page, which sets up a nice little rhythm of reading and eating, reading and eating. Certain sandwiches can be quite good, too, a cold turkey sandwich, say, or a ham sandwich, or any other cold cuts that are without greasiness, which will inevitably find its way onto the page, as the jelly from a peanut butter and jelly sandwich inevitably will. It's a deep problem, and Reading Lunches, on the model of TV Dinners, may be the solution. I hope to get around to packaging such lunches for mass consumption once I get off the proposal I have been writing to Ted Turner about my idea for turning some of the great Hollywood Technicolor extravaganzas — *The Ten Commandments, Gone With the Wind, Fantasia* — into black and white.

I hope nobody is gaining the impression that, merely because I seem to be reading all the time, I get much reading done. I don't, or at least it doesn't feel as if I do. Perhaps the chief reason I don't is that, apart from being an unmethodical reader, I am also a fairly slow reader and have been ever since I made the decision, in my early twenties, to become a writer. As a writer, I don't claim to read more penetratingly than others, but I do find that I ask certain questions while reading that nonwriters need not ask. Anyone reading an interesting passage in a book asks, if often only subconsciously, Is what I have just read formally correct? Is it beautiful? What does it mean? Do I believe it? Along with these questions, a writer asks two others: How, technically, did the author bring it off? and Is there anything here that I can appropriate (why bring in a word like *steal* when it isn't absolutely required) for my own writing? Reading not alone for meaning and pleasure but also for style, in which further meaning and pleasure are usually to be found, can surely keep a fellow from being able, as the speed-reading schools all promise, to sit down early of a Saturday afternoon to read through the collected works of Werner Sombart and still have plenty of time left over to enjoy oneself at the big dance.

If I were a fast reader, I have sometimes thought, it might only be the worse for me. My reading ambitions might have doubled. I might have been unhappy — felt guilty — if I didn't read at least a book a day, as the literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman once told me that he did. As a fast reader, too, I should have often been tempted to stay up all night to finish a stirring book — a thing I have done only twice in my life, both times with novels: once, in my adolescence, with Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door*, and a second time, in my twenties, with I. J. Singer's *The Brothers Ashkenazi*. H. L. Mencken is said to have been a blazingly fast reader. Samuel Johnson



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may have been, if not faster, more efficient, for according to Adam Smith's account as retold through James Boswell, Johnson "had a peculiar facility in seizing at once what was valuable in any book, without submitting to the labour of perusing it from beginning to end." It was Johnson who thought Henry Fielding's novels a waste of time, who said that no one ever wished *Paradise Lost* longer, and extended this remark by once asking Mrs. Piozzi, "Was there ever yet any thing written by mere man that was wished longer by its readers, excepting *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Pilgrim's Progress*?" Johnson's own method was to begin a book in the middle and if he felt the inclination to read more to go back to the beginning.

My own present modus operandi is to begin a book at the beginning and, for one reason or another, often to bog down somewhere near the middle. On a quick search of our apartment, I find twenty-three books with bookmarks in them, and this does not count books I am reading for professional reasons. Jumping from one book to another, reading lots of magazines in between, sometimes I go a week or two without actually finishing a book. Every once in a while, out of sheer frustration, I sit down and finish reading two or three books, if only to get some minor sensation of completion in my life. All these half-read books, taken together, form no pattern, show no evidence of anything resembling coherence. Here, for example, currently resting half-read on the coffee table in the living room is the following pile of books: *Max Weber*, a biography by his wife Marianne Weber; *Words in Commotion: And Other Stories* by Tommaso Landolfi; *Collected Poems, 1919–1976* by Allen Tate; *Fast Company: How Six Master Gamblers Defy the Odds — And Always Win* by Jon Bradshaw; *A Part of Myself*, the autobiography of the German playwright Carl Zuckmayer; *A Distant Episode: The Selected Stories* by Paul Bowles; and *Conducted Tour: A Journey Through Twelve Music Festivals of Europe and Australia* by Bernard Levin. One distinctly feels the want, in this brief list, of a slender volume of instruction on needlepoint for left-handers and a Rumanian cookbook for heterosexual men who like to entertain at home, which would round things off nicely.

What admirable catholicity of taste! I can imagine some people saying in response to this confusing little pile of books. But then I can as readily imagine others saying, What a mush-brain the man must be! Myself, I incline toward the latter camp. If I had to extrapolate the personality of the man from this pile of his half-read books, I would posit a man without much discipline, an intellectual clearly, but also a hedonist of the intellect, who gives way to his every whimsical interest. He may be a man who has come to feel that not only is reading a significant form of experience but in some respects it is rather more efficient and pleasurable than actual experience. He is a man — no *may* about it — who was much taken with the following brief passage, in a review by Mark Amory, in the British *Spectator*:

> Reading about bridge has several advantages over playing it: no waiting, no cross partners, you do not lose money, you can stop when you want to, it can be done in the bath, every hand has a point. Best of all, you can visit above your station, and at least appreciate the skill of others.

Each of us will have his or her own list of words or phrases that can readily be substituted for *bridge* in that passage. Mine would include *boxing*, *Third World travel*, *complicated love affairs*.

As widespread and central an experience as reading is, seldom is reading mentioned in novels. We are told that Don Quixote's imagination was inflamed by reading too many trashy novels; so, too, was Emma Bovary's, much to her ultimate chagrin; and Jane Austen occasionally makes plain that one of her characters is victimized by his or her reading. But the only novel in which a character actually appears sitting down in a chair reading, at least to my knowledge, is Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. The narrator of the novel comes upon the young American Larry Darrell, sitting in his club reading William James's *The Principles of Psychology* and at the end of the day he is still there, having finished reading James's nearly fourteen-hundred-page tome in a single sitting. This small bit of reporting has always seemed to me to place in peril Maugham's reputation as a writer in the realist tradition.

Visual artists have done better by the subject of reading. Renaissance painters would occasionally paint a monk or saint at study.



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Persians would paint a caliph or scholar in a garden with a volume of verse in his hand. A pity, I have always thought, that Rodin didn't put a book in the other hand of *The Thinker.* The nineteenth-century painter Gustave Caillebotte, who was much interested in the life of the mind, has at least three paintings that I know of in which people are reading: in one, a man in a high straw hat, a loose white blouse, and espadrilles is reading with his back to the viewer, while his wife pauses in their lovely garden; in another, three women are doing needlework while a fourth reads from a small book, perhaps containing poems; and in the third, a man is reading a newspaper as his wife, whose back is to us, nevertheless expresses forlorness as she looks out a heavily draped window onto a Parisian street. I thought Edward Hopper might have painted people reading, but, on further thought, given Hopper's penchant for the subject of loneliness, it is unlikely, for no one absorbed in a book is really lonely.

*On Reading* is a charming little book of photographs, chiefly taken in Paris and New York, by the Hungarian photographer André Kertész (1894–1985). Many of these show people reading in public places: parks, churches, libraries, fire escapes, standing on city streets. However public the setting, a person reading, these beautiful photographs make plain, is engaged in a private act. One also grasps that reading, though far from a passive act, is nonetheless a reposeful one. Reading may provide most of us all the repose we obtain outside of sleep. Whether he is photographing an elderly vagrant reading a newspaper just fished out of a trash can or a well-set-up gentleman in his book-lined, wood-paneled study in Paris, people out of motion, at rest, in repose, is Kertész's true subject in this book. Repose ought, in some part, to be the intention of all readers.

Some reading, of course, is more reposeful than others. The least reposeful for me is that provided by the newspapers. Many people make a meal out of a newspaper, chewing and swallowing every morsel; I can't find the makings for the lightest of snacks. I read only one, the *New York Times*, and that only six days a week, and never, never, like the prostitutes of Athens, on Sunday. A wise man whose name I cannot recall said that one picks up newspapers in anticipation and inevitably sets them down in disappointment. I no longer feel the anticipation. I chiefly consult the newspaper to get a feeling for the heft and slant of current political opinion and to discover — the only real news — who has died. I scan the letters column in the (usually) vain hope of finding a man or woman after my own heart. I take a pass on the editorials, unless they promise to be especially cowardly, and quickly check the sports. I glance at the reviews and absurdities on display in the pages given over to the arts. I merely glimpse the general news, and read only to the end articles about scandal. I prefer to have the whole deal out of the way in something under twenty minutes, and generally do.

I suppose I justify being so cavalier about reading newspapers because I put in so much time reading magazines, which provide me with a vast quantity of information about current events, social trends, and what is the going thing in art and much else. Something like twenty-five magazines come into this apartment, all but four of them American. I love magazines, and shall never forget the excitement when in my last year of college I discovered such intellectual magazines as *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, and *Encounter.* Around the same time I began reading *The New Yorker*, which I have continued to do for more than thirty years, and other magazines — *The New Republic*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic* — for nearly as long. There are times when it feels as if *all* I read are magazines, other times when the backlog of unread magazines rises perilously high and getting through them seems an impossibility. At such times, I hope that the magazines that continue to arrive will have nothing in them of interest to me: that *The New Republic* will give an issue over to a symposium on arms control, that *The Atlantic* will run a thirty-two-page essay on global soil erosion, that *The New Yorker* will begin a seven-article series on growing surprisingly large radishes in canoes in southwest Canada by John McPhee. I earlier mentioned not reading the *New York Times* on Sunday, but a friend saves the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Times Magazine* for me, and I pick them up from him in clumps of eight or ten copies of each. Having all these copies there before me all at once is a wonderfully effective way of warding off any chance of my reading, say, a review of the memoirs of a woman who grew up in the home of a reform rabbi in Las Vegas or a



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lengthy account of industrial development along the banks of the Gogra in Nepal.

But lest anyone get the mistaken notion that I have become even mildly discriminating in my reading habits in my middle years, let it be known that I am a subscriber to *Vanity Fair*. There is nothing about *Vanity Fair* I like, but I find myself reading a large amount of each issue, doubtless with a stricken look upon my face, for it is filled with articles written by people, about other people, all whose ideas on what constitutes the good life are so far distant from my own as to make it almost seem as if we are of different species. I also alternate subscribing to *Esquire*, *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, and a newer more malicious magazine called *Spy*. Any one of the three is quite sufficient, for their main purpose, at least in my personal reading diet, is to remind me how far behind the times I am falling — and, given the times, how pleasant is the fall. As if to underscore this, *Spy*, to which I currently subscribe, prints a good deal of material in a minuscule type that I cannot read without strain. Continual reading, surely, has contributed to the fact that I now wear glasses almost full-time. "Professor," a student said to me the other day, "I didn't recognize you not wearing your glasses." "Ah, my dear," I wanted to answer, "I do not recognize myself wearing them."

My eyesight does not figure to improve, nor does my appetite for reading figure to diminish. I wish I could settle down into fixed reading habits — like the man I know who reads a chapter of *Pickwick Papers* every evening — or begin now to devote myself to rereading many of the important books I read badly because I read them too early in life the first time around. But I think this is unlikely. If anything, my reading has become more desultory than ever. Only recently have I begun to read about music in I won't say a serious but in a fairly large-scale way. Once musical notation is put on the page, I am a goner, but I do enjoy reading about the lives of the great composers and the memoirs of the great performers. I always read a great deal of literary criticism, but now I read more music, art, and dance criticism. I like to read criticism, to watch a man or woman stand and deliver his or her understanding of how art works and how well a particular artist has brought it all off. The only criticism I do not read is that having anything to do with the Brontës. Why, you ask, exclude the Brontës? I don't really know, except that they are all so gloomy, and excluding one small body of writing makes me feel as if I have drawn at least one line and am in some sort of control of my reading life, which of course I am not.

As one grows older, reading becomes an ever keener pleasure and an ever greater comedy. Part of the pleasure derives intrinsically from the activity itself; and part from its extrinsic rewards, not the least of which is knowing that there will always be plenty to read and so superannuation presents no real fear. (Great readers have this advantage over great lovers.) The comedy of reading is owing in part to one's memory, which in the natural course of things retains less and less of what one reads; and in part to that oldest joke of all, which Dostoyevsky insists comes to each of us afresh, I speak — hushed tones please — of death, which among other erasures rubs out all that one has read over a lifetime.

Still, as addictions go, reading is among the cleanest, least harmful, easiest to feed, happiest. As an addiction, however, one shouldn't underestimate its power. If reading has presented me with many of the most delightful moments in my life, there have also been times when I should rather read than be with a friend, or when reading about life has seemed more attractive than life itself, and I happen to be extremely fond of life. My heavy reading schedule keeps me from thinking too much about an afterlife, but it occurs to me that, in the various descriptions I have read of heaven, no one ever mentions a library or bookstores there. Can it be that there will be no books or magazines in heaven? (Hell, I assume, will be full of newspapers, a fresh edition of each published every thirty seconds, so that no one will ever feel caught up.) If there is nothing to read in heaven, I am not sure I want to go. But should I ever be invited, I trust that whoever is sent to fetch me will at least have the common courtesy to allow me the few moments required to come to the end of my last paragraph.



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# The Paradoxes of Creativity

JACQUES BARZUN

THE FIRST PARADOX RESIDES in the very idea of Creation. To most people, that idea means producing something where nothing was before—making a thing out of nothing. But the same people who take that meaning for granted also believe from common sense and the teachings of science that nothing can be made from nothing; every object or creature is only the transformation of some pre-existing thing. In scientific terms, this is the law of conservation governing matter and energy.

But by a further turn of thought the question arises: "How did anything whatever come to be for later conservation and transformation?" The idea of creation ex nihilo returns full force. Believers in the literal truth of the Bible are sure of an answer, which is that an all-powerful being performed what none of us can do. Unfortunately, the well-named book of Genesis is also of two minds; it contains not one but two stories of creation. In the first chapter, the world and its denizens come out of chaos, which is nothing. In the second, they are made out of the ground, which is already there, as in most primitive cosmogonies. Biblical scholars tell us that the more majestic creation-from-the-void was in fact a later, sophisticated version that got put ahead of the other, older one. The vast majority of the church fathers and Catholic believers, as well as all good Protestants, have believed in creation out of nothing. This conception is so strong that it influenced the King James translators, who in strict grammar should have said that God *gave form* to the earlier chaos.

These differences and distinctions occur again, as we shall see, in theories of artistic and scientific creation. The present-day conflict between Creationists and Evolutionists exemplifies this dualism: to create species, evolution needs material to work on. This situation is paradoxical because there seems no way to escape see-sawing between the two ideas; it is virtually a form of human thought; we encounter it on the humblest level. Take the useful household book called *How to Make*

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✪ JACQUES BARZUN, the distinguished critic and historian, is the author, most recently, of *The Culture We Deserve*, a collection of his essays published by Wesleyan University Press.



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*Something Out of Nothing*. The title is catchy but makes one suspicious. Hence the subtitle, which is: *Newel Posts Into Candelabra*. With this double view we get Creation *and* Evolution; the one excites our love of miracles, the other reassures common sense—and also invites us to perform with the aid of a recipe.

But to return for a moment to creation on the large scale, what does the latest science say about the genesis of the cosmos? The so-called Big Bang theory of the astrophysicists states that it came out of the void in a sudden explosion. Is this creation from nothing? The answer is yes, or rather yes *but*, because if you ask "explosion of what?" you are told that a vacuum is not altogether empty. It contains sweet nothings called "quantum fluctuations," which can somehow coagulate into something. Nothing happens until, according to calculations, the nothings add up to twenty-two pounds. Then comes the Big Bang. It is clear that Paradox no. 1 has science in its grip too. What is more, the do-it-yourself book about candelabra has its scientific counterpart: a Dr. Guth at Stanford has declared that given the right equipment he could get a universe going in his laboratory. Here, surely, is a man who can call himself gifted with creativity.

In contemporary culture, no idea is so appealing, no word is put to more frequent and more varied use than *creativity*. In a new reference book of contemporary quotations, there are fifteen entries for Creativity and only three for Conversation, two for Wisdom, one for Contemplation, and none for Serenity or Repose. The magic of the word *creative* is so broad that no distinct meaning need be attached to it; it fits all situations, pointing to nothing in particular. Its sway extends over all of art and science, naturally, and it takes us beyond these to the basic conditions of modern society, to education, to our view of the human mind and what we conceive to be the goal of life itself.

Creativity has become what divine grace and salvation were to former times. It is incessantly invoked, praised, urged, demanded, hoped for, declared achieved, or found lacking. I take this last complaint from the most recent presidential campaign, in which a leading Democrat called Mr. Dukakis "lacking in creativity"—no further details given, the charge apparently self-explanatory.

The assumption is that creativity is an inborn quality that colors everything one does. It is no longer a rare power found in few people and concentrated on one particular skill. Indeed, it is often attributed to whole groups, as when the head of a dating agency said: "I wanted to attract the professional, the creative." But it is in business and education, both formerly thought rather humdrum, that the thought of creation is most obsessive. Not only are there several best-sellers that teach "creativity in business," but corporations include "creative departments"



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and "directors of creative services." Schools advertise "Creative Continuing Education" or define education itself as "helping to live creatively through changing times." Simultaneously, critics complain that schools "do nothing for creativity, because they are institutionalized."

What else they could be we are not told, but we get an inkling when we hear that "after kindergarten, schools do not draw on creative ability." Kindergarten gives the child a freedom in learning that is close to play and it comes to an end in later grades. This is a clue to what concerns us here. *Creation, creativity* have come to mean simply release from compulsion and regimentation. This inference is confirmed by the now familiar demand for a "creative job"—that is, one in which much is left to individual initiative. A remark by the notable baseball player Ozzie Smith is to the point: "The first time I played shortstop I felt there was no other place for me on the field. It gave me the freedom to create as I feel." Clearly, he enjoys not being tied down to any of the other infield positions; at shortstop he roams at will, makes his own decisions, he is indeed a free agent.

It is the sense of being hemmed in by the job and the world that has caused the general yearning for something labeled creativity. The word is a condemnation of modern life, especially of modern work, organized as it is in vast networks, themselves parts of still larger systems. Rigid interdependence has long been cited as the cause of alienation on the factory assembly line; the same controls now hobble the mental worker, whose education and self-esteem make him resent a faceless coercion, worse than an arbitrary boss. *Create*, then, means to do one's own thing, to perform by choosing means and opportunity at will.

Systems imply another feature, equally galling. Like industry, business and the professions now cut what is to be done into pieces assigned to different hands. Nobody produces anything whole, having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Everybody being a specialist means repetition without completion, so that no object ever emerges as the fruit of one's labors; nothing feeds the sense of accomplishment. Teamwork is much touted—by the organizers—but its satisfaction is indirect and loses its savor when the "team" is an anonymous mass in the hundreds, as happens not only in corporations but also in broadcasting networks, publishing empires, research laboratories, large foundations, and other supposedly intellectual establishments.

To sum up, the cult of creativity springs from the hatred of abstractness, dependence, repetition, and incompletion in work. The blight cannot be called drudgery, for this has always existed; the independent craftsman endured it cheerfully as a tested means toward the goal: a finished product, *his* product. Even the serf on the soil could look forward to a result, the harvest. The very ditch digger has his reward: he



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has created a hole, and from start to finish, whereas the truck driver who collects the tools of the diggers has only an endless round.

In these conditions, it was perhaps natural to borrow the term *create* from the artists, who preeminently make objects—whole objects at their own pace and according to their own ideas. But widespread as the feeling of deprivation in modern work may be, it is not evenly distributed: some people in business, industry, and the professions must be what *they* call creative, or the evil that a psychologist has called "career malaise" would not be curable by what he also calls a "creative work dimension." So we are bound to glance at these "dimensions." As it happens, a "Study of Creativity in Daily Life" has recently been made, complete with an Index of Creativity by which to measure oneself and others. It ranges from Minor Creativity to Exceptional. Here is an example of Minor: "a secretary who sometimes edits books on the side." Exceptional is "the amateur botanist who strictly limits hours at his regular job and often spends 20-hour days to complete botanical experiments."

This study is said to "illuminate the creative life." I find that it illuminates just the opposite. It confirms what I have said about the distaste for modern work, and the antidotes it names imply no more than the desire for autonomy and continuity of effort. That is not zeal for creation. Even the botanist who skimps on his duty to his employer and exemplifies the decline of the work ethic only makes amateur science into an absorbing hobby.

People who go in for avocations to fill the void left by their jobs and then stick the label *creative* on these sidelines are quite ingenuously debasing the meaning of the term. One tells us that "the home is a document to one's individuality and creativity." Another speaks of the "bold creativity" displayed by the chairman of a Senate subcommittee. The low point of non-significance in the use of the word was probably reached by the woman who, in recommending ways of making friends with strangers in a supermarket, said: "The secret is to be a little creative—think before you speak."

You can measure the distance that *creativity* has drifted away from the idea of creation if you change the phrase "a creative life" to "the life of a creator." This last phrase makes one think at once of Michelangelo or Beethoven or Einstein. The other is a thought-cliché or else a label not to be taken literally, as when we say that an actor creates a role or a freshman takes "creative writing." In this academic usage, *creative* denotes poetry or fiction; nobody could tell you why the essays of Montaigne and the Gettysburg Address were not creative writing. In any case, a creative writing course, being instruction, calls mostly for imitative writing.



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This conventional usage was harmless, but now that the adjective has been trivialized, the idea of creativity has actually turned into its opposite. Far from promising the extraordinary and unheard of, it has come to signify a feature of employment that everybody once had a right to expect.

This new paradox was noted by a writer who deflated the claims of an advertising executive. "Creative," he said, "is industry jargon for words and ideas that go into an ad." One welcomes the translation but must not conclude that the abuse of *creative* is only a verbal fault. Rather, it is rooted in our conception of the human being. Democratic theory favors individualism (even though democratic practice may repress it) and the theory posits that, being by definition different, individuals possess originality and the urge to show it. Self-expression is promoted throughout the culture from infancy onward: be yourself, have a mind of your own, despise convention, speak up and protest, develop your unique abilities. These injunctions are expected to yield social benefits in the form of new perceptions, ideas, or devices. The word *innovation* is on everybody's tongue almost as often as the word *creative*. Rewards in prestige and promotion await the innovative person with a creative plan—or vice versa.

Looking back over the last five hundred years, one may question whether the true creators of our civilization have ever needed this urging and coaching in order to become their remarkable selves and to make something really new. Most often their work has been hampered or ignored by the very society that now keeps boosting innovation. *This* paradox takes the form of saying, in words or by actions, "We want what is new and wonderful, not the strange and repellent thing that you offer." The people who are thought original and get pampered are those who bring familiar things titivated by touches of novelty. Think of the tricks that gain attention today in any of the arts; look at those who express themselves by tampering with what others have made—scriptwriters, directors of plays and operas who cut and transpose and change settings, adapters of all kinds. Shakespeare, whom everybody supposedly worships, is thus regularly mutilated by creative minds that know how to improve him.

When we speak soberly of creation in art or science, we surely mean something quite different. We have in mind a conception of art and intellect that developed in Western civilization beginning in the Renaissance and reaching its present form only in the early 1800s. The workers and craftsmen of earlier ages did not worry about self-expression and did not talk of creativity. On the contrary, the best craftsman was the one who reproduced the traditional model most exactly. Innovation came in the form of a new technical process—for firing clay or designing



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an arch; or again it arose out of religious decisions to use or not to use certain motifs or imagery. The great independent creator, the genius whom we affect to revere today, is a new social type who became the central figure in the cult of art when the rise of science brought on the decline of religion.

According to Shelley, it was Tasso who in the late 1500s first said that only God and the poet deserve the name of creator. Voltaire probably picked up the idea from Tasso and made a single casual use of it in the mid-eighteenth century. But by that time, the words *create* and *creation* had filtered into critical writing, although with a very limited sense. A poet was said to create when he introduced into his work fanciful, unreal beings and events. Thus Shakespeare's *Tempest* was called his most creative work, because of Ariel, Caliban, and the enchanted isle. It would have surprised everybody to hear that *Hamlet* was a creation, for it only held the mirror up to nature. Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 gives no instance of the term in the modern sense, nor does the four-volume enlargement of 1818. The only uses cited are: the king's creation of a peer, death creating a vacancy (or similar sequences) and, lastly, an illusion leading to a false belief, as when Shakespeare in *Macbeth* calls the dagger "a creation of the mind."

The application of *creation* to a work of art coincided with a parallel change in the use of the word *genius*. In ancient and medieval times, a genius or demon was a person's guardian spirit, giving good or evil advice in daily affairs. Then *genius* came to mean a knack of doing a particular thing—a gifted person was said to "have a genius" for calculation or public speaking. It gradually acquired a more honorific sense. By the 1750s *genius* was defined by the poet Edward Young as "the power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end." This notion fitted Shakespeare's case, for he was thought lacking in discipline, learning, and art. He had a wild, untutored genius.

In the next generation came the subtle shift from "having" to "being" a genius, with no limitation such as Young included in his praise. A genius was now a fully conscious, competent, and original "creator," and only two classes of artists were recognized: the geniuses and the non-geniuses, the second group being dismissed as "talents." Unable to create, they followed the path blazed by the genius.

The artist being seen as a creator gave art a new meaning. It was no longer a careful imitation of nature or observance of established rules. It was discovery, revelation, invention in all realms—new aspects of nature, new insights into character and social life, new and astonishing technique. The genius fashioned masterpieces that startled by their form and substance, thereby proving all rules wrong or futile: they also



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shocked by telling truths previously hidden behind convention and stupidity.

All this bore hard on the public and the merely talented. The art lover must now continually learn new habits and steel himself against the shocks, while every aspiring artist must strive for novelty at any cost. Since the works of genius, being born of a unique imagination, do not resemble one another nor those made earlier, each seemed a world complete in itself. The analogy with God's creation became obvious and inevitable.

Equally obvious is the fact that this new conception of the genius-creator has become for the modern world the prime model of human existence. The students who rioted in Chicago twenty years ago included in their platform: "The abolition of money" and "everybody an artist." As for adults, many now find the former patterns of glory—the soldier, the statesman, the divine—no longer on a par with the artist and the scientist. These are the new heroes, because they seem the only selfless and beneficent members of society; indeed they exemplify the scorn for money as well as the life that ordinary work precludes: no thought of gain, no routine, no orders from above or below, no bourgeois conventions—continual creativity and eternal fame.

The popularizing of such ideas came with the spread of public education and the diffusion of culture through libraries, museums, and the mechanical means of reproducing books, art, and music. The result has been that more and more people are tempted—indeed encouraged—to write novels, poems, and plays, to paint pictures, compose, and perform. It has begun to look as if artistic ability were universal and only stunted or repressed in those who do not become artists. Creativity, in short, is everybody's birthright. It is this democratizing that has produced the glut of acceptable works of art and with it the perpetual shortage of money for the support of artists. This in turn fuels perpetual resentment in artists and their well-wishers, even though modern society is the most generous on record in its eager consumption of cultural products.

Pondering all these facts suggests that in the blanket term *creativity* there are at least four layers of meaning. At the bottom is the commonplace quality of initiative illustrated above from workaday sources. Next comes the ordinary, widespread knack of drawing, singing, dancing, and versifying, modestly kept for private use. Above this level we find the trained professional artist, including the commercial, who supplies the market with the products in vogue. At the top is the rare bird, the genius, whose works first suggested the idea that a human being could be called a creator.

It seems to me to make no difference whether this scale denotes one



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quality bestowed in increasing amounts or two, three, or four distinct powers. What is important is to maintain in private and public opinion the awareness that there is a scale; one might call that effort "quality control." It should prevent one from believing, as many reviewers and other good people do, that the masterpieces touted in the journals every week or every month are actually such, and—at the other end of the scale—that the painting done by Johnny or Susan or the picking up of driftwood on the beach, or the spraying of graffiti on the wall are creative acts in any reasonable sense.

A very able journalist recently wrote of a woman's giving birth as "the ultimate act of creation." If that is an acceptable view, then we must find some other word to describe God's performance and that of the great artist or scientist. The appreciation of true creators (and their early recognition) depends on remembering that even if their abilities are simply large in amount, there is a point where quantity suddenly turns into a difference of quality. It behaves like the critical mass in physics, which sets off a chain reaction in otherwise placid material. Colloquial speech records that same surprising sort of event when it uses *create* to mean whipping up a tantrum out of little or nothing.

The leap of creation tantalizes curiosity and prompts close scrutiny in hopes of an explanation. Some of the distinguishing traits of genius have long been noted. Plato wrote two dialogues on the ways of poets to show that they work in a kind of frenzy they cannot account for. That is the reason why the philosopher wanted to exclude them from his ideal republic: they are not rational, responsible people. Like the prophetess at Delphi, they are mad—and bad poets if they are *not* mad. He made a pun on the subject—Μαντικε (prophecy) is much the same as Μανικε (the state of being manic).

This observation is linked with the belief in a resident genius or demon whose urgings may inspire great deeds or great wickedness. With the prominence of "the artist," the connection between genius and strange, abnormal behavior was often taken for granted and served as an explanation. Shakespeare was only half joking when he described the poet with eyes "in fine frenzy rolling," and Dryden meant seriously his line about "great wits to madness near allied." Yet another piece of theorizing in this vein was published only five years ago.

Indeed, the systematic study of genius has swung between this assumption of the crazy artist and the idea of common ability rising in regular gradation to uncommon heights. Intelligence testers actually give to high scorers the name of genius; it is a standard classification. Earlier, Darwin's cousin Francis Galton had gathered statistics on what he called human faculty that proved to his satisfaction how it was



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distributed. It seemed to him a law of nature that there should be geniuses at one end of the curve to balance the idiots at the other.

Those investigators who, as it were, put their money on madness, have gone about proving their case by studying the parentage and diseases of artists. Cesare Lombroso, who found a criminal type, also found a genius type of warped physical and mental constitution. But the man who made the greatest splash with that idea was Dr. Max Nordau with his book *Degeneration*, a best-seller that alarmed and delighted readers at the turn of the century. It asserted that nearly all contemporary masters in every art were degenerate or diseased: Zola, Wagner, Ibsen, Tolstoy, the Impressionists were all hospital or asylum cases.

In a stunning refutation called "The Sanity of Art," Bernard Shaw established the paradox that poets and other artists are called great only when their works show the rest of the world some new and profound truth about man or society: geniuses, said Shaw, are "masters of reality." So if they are mad as well, it follows that it takes the mad to teach the sane. But of course the madness theory is unfounded. Some geniuses have been mad: Tasso, van Gogh, Sir Isaac Newton showed symptoms of mental aberration, as did Dr. Johnson. But (like Johnson himself), Byron, Goethe, Rubens, Berlioz were among the sanest men who ever lived, able managers of complex worldly enterprises, models of elevated common sense.

What is true is that when Dr. Nordau was making his diagnoses by remote inspection, a number of poets and artists were dragging out lives of disease, alcoholism, drug addiction, and psychosis. W. B. Yeats, who was strong and healthy, was appalled at the extent of the evil and wondered what curse had befallen his generation. The social and economic conditions of the time suffice to explain the curse—that is, the pressures that sensitive and often destitute human beings failed to withstand.

There is moreover what might be termed the biographical fallacy. Books about the lives of the great fill our minds with anecdotes of their odd behavior, but these are oddities only because the comparable acts of ordinary people are never written up for the world to read. We shake our heads on reading that Dickens had to have certain ornaments in a certain pattern on his writing table. But nobody ever hears of the bank manager who has to doodle and must have a colored pencil to do it or he cannot think financially. Yet both are merely using a sensory stimulus to trigger a habit of work.

The specific traits of creative genius have never been ascertained, nor any correlation with genetic, medical, or environmental factors. I have read more English, German, Italian, and French studies of genius than I care to remember, and I think their findings would leave any reader



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unconvinced and uninstructed. For a sample, turn to the article "Creativity" in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. It starts out with the usual confidence of people armed with method and faith in science; it winds up pathetically with a list of characteristics that covers the full range of human abilities—necessarily so, since the world's great performers have been of every kind and temperament.

It is wiser and more entertaining to read good biographies, and even better, memoirs, letters, and diaries. If one guards against the fallacy of "How odd!", they will be found to disprove every cliché, including the definition of genius as an infinite capacity for taking pains—or, as they say it in French, "a protracted patience." Ruskin, writing to Rossetti, repeatedly urged him not to draw and rub out and draw again, adding on one occasion: "I am not more sure of anything in this world than that the utmost a man can do is that which he can do without effort." Shaw put it succinctly when he said: "Great art is either easy or impossible." When Dickens was asked to account for the stroke of genius that changed *Pickwick Papers* in chapter six from a set of rural mishaps for comic illustration into a piece of world literature, all he said was: "Then I thought of Mr. Pickwick."

But no sooner do we conclude that inspiration is all, than we bump into Flaubert who toiled at his desk like a digger in a coal mine. Of course, his full output was four novels and three short stories, not Dickens's fifteen novels, plus innumerable tales, travel notes, and historical sketches, all this done while editing periodicals and giving public readings. To Flaubert great art was not impossible, but it was not easy. Nor was it to Beethoven, whose notebooks testify to the very effort that Ruskin advised against—try and try again until the theme, the development, the form satisfy. Many others have recorded their life-and-death struggle with the material of their art. Conrad was a great story-teller from the start, but Balzac had to write trash for ten years before his genius erupted. As Goethe said: "Blood sticks to the work."

As for men of science, they have touted unwearied persistence as the chief condition of their creativeness. But they have also spoken of sudden illumination—Gauss idly gazing at the hills outside his window, Poincaré finding the solution of intractable problems on arising from sleep, and so on. Chalk up another paradox.

And it is not the last. So far from creativity being a permanent trait that varies only in intensity, it can disappear totally—and sometimes reappear. Hugo Wolf and A. E. Housman are notorious cases in point. Both had two periods of creative energy separated by a long fallow interval. And the saying that poets die young may carry a double meaning in the word *die*: the body survives but the genius has gone, as is frequently true of mathematicians and chess players. At the opposite



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extreme we find long-lived poets, such as Wordsworth and Victor Hugo, who keep on producing genuine poetry to the end. They go to work, as somebody has said, like bureaucrats, writing day in and day out. The quality fluctuates, but the power never vanishes.

Still more puzzling in its variations is the occurrence of creative historical periods. Why the crowd of great painters and thinkers in early Renaissance Italy, then the migration of the art to the Netherlands? Why the Elizabethan dramatists and musicians? France, Spain, Germany, Austria, and Russia also have their high moments in one or another art, which relapses into the worthy regularity of the talented, until the next outbreak of the creative epidemic. No correlation is to be found between these bursts of genius and peace or war, freedom or tyranny, prosperity or decline, let alone with climate or race. The only feature present every time is the crowding of the gifted on one spot. But this is a kind of tautology, since creative period *means* a cluster of creators, which soon attracts to its center other eager artists from all over. Here again, the critical mass changes the character of the pre-existing elements.

Baffled in the search for something like a genius type, modern psychologists and critics have pursued another entity, which they call the creative process. It is characteristic of a technological age to imagine that creation is a series of steps that can be discovered and analyzed, like digestion or photosynthesis. The public, too, accepts the idea when librarians exhibit writers' manuscripts and bid everybody observe the "process" by which the poet got to his final draft. Well, manuscript corrections may be interesting, but as explanation they are illusory. What impelled dissatisfaction with a bad line may be guessed, but not the leap from it to the perfect phrasing. Besides, great writers have often spoiled some of their work by late revisions—Dryden, Wordsworth, Henry James, to name a few. Is that a process of de-creation?

If creation were a process, by this time its operation would have been reduced to formulas, recipes, which intelligence and method could apply to produce great art and great science. Those who come nearest to seizing the secret are the immediate followers of the innovators; and followers, by common consent, rank second best. For what they have caught from the creators is technique, and technique is not enough. Something more is needed—and perhaps something less. Take the music of Saint-Saëns. Here was a precocious, enormously gifted musician; he could turn out pieces that seemed as if written by Mozart or Beethoven or anybody he wished. But as Berlioz, who was his mentor, regretfully remarked, the young man lacked *in*experience. Courses in fiction writing may number top-notch students, yet not turn out Chekhovs and Henry Jameses; though someone here and there may in time become—himself. Similarly, laboratories all over the globe are manned



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by scientists who probably deserve to be called brilliant without being of the breed of Newton, Faraday, Pasteur, and Einstein. In short, creation does not proceed, it occurs.

If so, what is the conceivable source of the creative power? Could one discover it, at least one paradox would be removed—I mean the apparent contradiction of great art achieved with ease or else with anxious toil. One could say that some artists must dig a deep well to tap the source, whereas others have a spring that bubbles up on its own. Or to put it differently, the creative moments are what matter and they come at different intervals during the work, which is always long and laborious. The ever-inventive Dickens spent long mornings in front of a series of false starts, and Balzac rewrote again and again on one set of proofs after another.

We are thus brought to the final paradox, the one inside the mind. For the past fifty years, the characteristics of creators have been attributed to the Unconscious with a capital *U*. Depth psychology posits that the instincts drive the mind and that individual thought is shaped by the way in which those drives are handled. In human society, the vicissitudes of growing up as well as the permanent forces of culture create inhibitions or repressions. These modify the interplay between the parts of this machinery and hence determine its products. According to one interpretation, great artists are like children, who, unsocialized, heed the imagination and speak out freely. The conscious mind of the adult artist and his acquired techniques merely organize the spontaneous voices from the Unconscious. Geniuses keep in touch with this creative force while the rest of us bottle it up by conventions and neuroses. Through this unusual freedom, the creator is able to express fundamental reality and teach us to see it as it is.

It is true that some artists have likened themselves to outspoken children, but this diagram of the psychologists is open to objections. In the first place, it supposes the mind to be a sort of gearbox set in motion by an engine below. The analogy fails to explain: a powerful engine, unobstructed, will make wheels move faster or longer, but it cannot make them do one thing rather than another. The pattern of the mind must itself be different if it is to perform different things, some of them extraordinary. Alternatively, if creativeness comes from the Unconscious, this hypothetical organ must hold knowledge of life and art in solution for crystallization by the mind; but the theory assigns no such range or subtlety to the biological drives.

Besides, the Unconscious is a piece of equipment that by definition everybody possesses. If, as is said, it contains the archetypal forms of feeling and belief that underlie both common thought and works of art, it follows that something else must exist to diversify this common fund



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of fantasy and make the visions of the poet differ from the daydreams of the ordinary man. Finally, it is notorious that artists, like most civilized people, suffer from neuroses; indeed, they suffer perhaps more, if we may judge from their misadventures in practical life. This contradicts the assumption that their remarkable works betoken ready communication with their Unconscious, particular or collective.

What, if anything, do the creators themselves have to say about conscious and unconscious? I mentioned earlier Poincaré's report of his mode of discovery: he struggles with a problem for many days, then lets it go, and in the end the hint of a solution comes to him as he emerges from sleep. Milton's muse, the poet said, "dictates to him slumbering"; Mozart wrote that while composing he felt as if he were under the spell of a strong dream. Helmholtz, the German physicist, would take solitary walks for relief from concentration, and the sought-for idea would come unbidden into his mind. Berlioz in his memoirs contrasts the unwelcome task of writing prose with that of writing music, which he says happens of itself, as by "an inexplicable mechanism."

All these observations point to the workings of a non-conscious agency, but is it the Unconscious of theory? Clearly, the unseen agency is put to work by the conscious mind, which demands an object and prepares elaborately to handle the makings of it. Nor is non-conscious incubation reserved for creators. When you can't remember a name, you try hard at first to bring it back—and fail. Having given up, you find it a while later floating up of its own accord. Every professional writer knows that the exact word he wants but cannot summon up will soon present itself if he only keeps on writing. Surely the deep Unconscious is not a dictionary; so the word or name that pops up was not among the drives or archetypes but in the subliminal region from which, for example, we draw the ability to play the piano while also talking seriously to a friend. The subliminal is not an originating force, but our memories and habits stored away.

It would appear, then, that the mystery of creation defies analysis; it may do so forever, like the workings of mind itself. Yet one student of the mind has offered facts and ideas that seem to me to bring us if not an explanation of genius and creation at least a right conception of their workings. I refer to William James, who took up these questions several times in different connections.

The genius, according to James, has an enormous capacity for perceiving similarities among disparate things; his mind jumps across the grooves cut by common experience. His is also a sensitive mind; every stimulus starts multiple trains of thought, wildly free associations. "In such minds," says James, "subjects bud and sprout and grow. . . . Their ideas coruscate, every subject branches infinitely before their



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fertile minds." This explains why being too good a student can limit creativity—what Berlioz termed "the lack of inexperience"—for learning follows traveled roads. And James, with *his* characteristic genius, draws a comparison which is at once comic and illuminating. He says that the profusion of possible ideas in the creative mind resembles the confusion of the muddle-headed person; hence the *eminently* muddle-headed are in a sense close to genius.

But clearly there is a difference between the two, which Dr. Harry Wilmer pointed out when he said that the non-genius "lets the awareness slip by." The genius's goal rivets his attention and puts order among his ideas. In fact, his concentration upon the activity required—writing, painting, composing; and in the sciences, observing, calculating, conceptualizing—becomes an obsession. In this effort, not merely the mind and the will, but the whole organism—muscles, blood, nerves, and glands—are involved. This mad passion or passionate madness is the reason why psychopathic personalities are often creators and why their productions are perfectly sane; the disturbance makes for the obsession, while the contents of the work are formed by the fertile, subtle, and vigilant intellect. This conception of genius would account for the paradox that it consists both of sudden inspiration and of patient, painstaking work. Hence also the versatility and often superhuman bulk of its output.

James's description has other corollaries. In essence, one act of creation is as amazing as a dozen, but in practice we reserve our fervent admiration for the artist who creates great works again and again. This amounts to a critical principle: magnitude and frequency of success are the proper measure of creativity. Exquisiteness and perfection may occasionally beguile us more, but they are lesser achievements. Again, the error of regarding children as artists is due to overlooking the paucity of their intellectual and emotional resources. Sensitive and uninhibited they may be, but their minds cannot encompass the vast array of thoughts, memories, and associations that the great artist fuses into a single shape. Every good listener has noticed this limitation in the child virtuoso who tries to interpret a masterpiece.

These considerations add force to the suggestion that the term *creativity* should not be loosely applied, squandered upon works and workers that are respectable enough on their own level but that do not stand comparison with genuine creation. Nowadays, originality, the cult of the new, and plain shock power have such a hold on our judgment that we pay humble attention to a great deal of nonsense and charlatanism. This gullibility spreads wide and provides a market for the users of the topsy-turvy as a formula. Present the familiar upside down and there's originality, nobody can deny that it's new. It is anybody's guess how



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much of contemporary art is the outcome of this recipe. One recent example turns up in an unimportant film, but it is typical. The maker of *Without a Clue* tells us: "It was that moment when you think, 'there's a good idea. What if Watson is actually the genius and Holmes is this ridiculous ham in front of Scotland Yard?' " Truly a splendid idea for defeating expectation, but a far cry from the idea that first created Holmes and Watson out of little or nothing.

It may seem an ultimate paradox to end with an example from a genre that can plead as excuse that it is not creative but commercial. Yet it is significant for the same reason that led me to distinguish creation from creativity. That reason lies in my conviction that a long period of creation is coming to an end. For some five hundred years Western civilization has enjoyed a profusion of high art, art "created by genius." Today, the conditions arising from machine industry and the democratic state have persuaded the world that creative power is within the reach of all by natural right, like political power. That belief has brought out many agreeable things that resemble true creation and are said to be the real thing.

But this extensive effort has had unexpected results. It has not only diluted the meaning of *creative*; it has also glutted the market with innumerable objects and performances arbitrarily called art, thereby making it even more arduous for true creation to find a public. Still more generally, "creative" foolery has been distorting, denaturing, destroying the fund of culture amassed since the Renaissance. That is the sense in which the filmmaker quoted above is typical. He found a pair of well-known creations and his creativity prompted him to confound their meaning, blur their appeal. This is in the tradition of Duchamp's putting a mustache on Mona Lisa and many other imitations of that famous de-creative act.

The impulse and the clever deeds are part of an irresistible historical sweep. Some of us might prefer to live in a time of construction, which has a different kind of excitement. But let no one repine. Rebuilding is bound to come, because true creative power is a phoenix, and the forces of destruction are clearing the space for its new flight, none can tell when or where. Meantime, if we are to recognize the bird when it appears, let us not forget that creation means making something new and making it out of little or nothing.



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# *On the Death of a Colleague*

STEPHEN DUNN

She taught theater, so we gathered
in the theater.
We praised her voice, her knowledge,
how good she was
with *Godot* and just four months later
with *Gigi*.
She was fifty. The problem in the liver.
Each of us recalled
an incident in which she'd been kind
or witty.
I told how she'd placed her hand
where the failure was,
taught me to speak from my diaphragm.
I was on stage
and heard myself wishing to be impressive.
Someone else spoke
of her cats and no one spoke
of her face
or the last few parties.
The fact was
I had avoided her for months.

It was a student's turn to speak, a sophomore,
one of her actors.
She was a drunk, he said, often came to class
reeking.



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Sometimes he couldn't look at her, the blotches,
the awful puffiness.
And yet she was a great teacher,
he loved her,
but thought someone should say
what everyone knew
because she didn't die by accident.

Everyone was crying. Everyone was crying and it
was almost over now.
The remaining speaker, an historian, said he'd cut
his speech short.
And the Chairman stood up as if by habit,
said something about loss
and thanked us for coming. None of us moved
except some students
to the student who'd spoken, and then others
moved to him, across dividers,
down aisles, to his side of the stage.

✪ STEPHEN DUNN teaches English at Stockton State College. His most recent collection of poems is *Between Angels*, published by W. W. Norton. "On the Death of a Colleague" is the eighth winner of the Mary Elinore Smith Poetry Prize. The $200 prize is given in memory of Miss Smith by her family and friends. Mary Elinore Smith, who died in 1981, was an editor of THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR.



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# *Sarah Orne Jewett*

ANN STRUTHERS

In the country of the pointed firs
Sarah Orne Jewett was taught to eat cake
while wearing white gloves. She didn't like boys;
her sisters' sharp elbows nudged her at parties
when she stared at the pretty girls.

She listened to grandmothers' stories,
the lame scrub woman's life, harsh as lye soap,
the egg lady, shoulders humped like a chicken's,
Granny Smith who kept a vegetable patch,
spoke poverty and lived granite.
She wrote their lives every morning at her desk
in the wide upstairs hall overlooking the secret woods.

With her first royalties
bought a fast thoroughbred named Sheila,
galloped across the fields, whipping the air.
After thirty took up with Annie Fields.
The neighbors said they had a "Boston marriage."
Her ice skates hung above the green mantle
in her stark bedroom
except in winter when she engraved the pond
with their sharp blades, a lantern fastened
to her left wrist for night skating.
Her sisters watched her
from the great windows of the house
writing bold yellow sentences on the dark.

✪ ANN STRUTHERS is a visiting associate professor at Coe College. Her poems have appeared in the *Seattle*, *Iowa*, and *North American* reviews. She is the author of *Stoneboat*, a book of poems.



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# Mistah Perkins—He Dead

## Publishing Today

GERALD HOWARD

EACH YEAR OUR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING churn out thousands of liberal arts graduates who would just about kill to have my job: book editor for an established trade publisher. I know just how they feel, for in the early seventies I was one of their yearning number, and as pathetically ill-formed and ill-informed as my aspirations were, I can't say that in any essential respect the profession has let me and my dreams down. I am paid a good dollar to read manuscripts and proposals that represent a nice slice of the best that is currently being thought and said, to select and then often help shape some of them for publication, and to engage the various publishing mechanisms so that those manuscripts make their way successfully into book form, into the bookstores, and finally into the hands of readers. The authors and colleagues with whom I work are about as pleasant and cultured and sharp and dedicated a group of folks as this civilization produces, and it is a joy to be associated with them. As a commissioned officer in the forward march of culture, I have something like a universal passport to pursue my personal enthusiasms, be they literary or intellectual or pop cultural. My daily work puts me in possession of the sort of inside skinny on events of the day that makes for interesting conversation at cocktail parties. As for those editorial lunches, well—they're everything you think they are.

So what's the beef? Why do book editors often end the workday with the white-collar equivalent of the thousand-yard stare? Why do so many of us adopt the armor of cynicism as protection against . . . against *what*? Well, each editor will have his own set of gripes, but for me it's a faster, huger, rougher, *dumber* publishing world than I could have anticipated.

The American publishing business today is in a tremendous state of confusion between its two classic functions: the higher-minded and more vocally trumpeted *mission civilisatrice* to instruct and edify and uplift the reading public and the less loudly advertised but, in the nature

✪ GERALD HOWARD is an editor in the trade department of W. W. Norton. He was previously executive editor of Viking Penguin.



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of things, more consistently compelling *mission commerciale* to separate the consumer from his cash. Happy the publisher (and happy the author) who can manage to make a single book fulfill both functions! The real art of publishing consists not in reconciling what are, in a capitalist system, quite simply irreconcilable imperatives but in orchestrating the built-in tensions in a harmonious fashion. However, the two-way road in publishing from the bottom line to Mount Olympus travels right across a fault line, and that is where the serious editor lives and plies his trade. To put it bluntly, the tectonic plates are shifting, there's an earthquake going on, and all that moving and shaking you've read about is making it hard to attend to business—or even to be certain, from day to day, just what our business is. The delicate task of orchestrating tensions becomes more difficult still when the walls threaten to collapse about you.

I overstate the situation, of course, but not by much. It may be that since book editors stand at the very center of the publishing process and also mediate between what the culture is offering up and what the firm is putting out, they register crises earlier and more severely, like canaries in coal mines. They certainly operate in highly contested, tremendously tricky terrain. Lionel Trilling famously referred to the "bloody crossroads" where literature and politics meet; the intersection between culture and commerce where editors do their work is no less sanguine a piece of ground. In this essay I'd like to explore the forces that are reshaping the landscape of American publishing, particularly as they affect the function of the book editor, be he the accomplice or the victim (or both) of those forces. This exploration will of necessity touch on matters of taste and judgment in writing that aspires to the status of literature. Indeed, it may illuminate the question of whether such writing is likely to be produced at all in the coming decades, and if so, what form it will take. I hope to be able to demonstrate that, first, matters are more hopeful in this respect than the conventional critics of American publishing are telling us; but, second, for many of the same reasons, things are in a parlous state. Our particular bloody crossroads is especially fertile ground for contradictions and ironies.

Most essays on book editing begin by attempting to dispel the mystery surrounding just what it is that a book editor *does*. In the mind of the educated public, the figure of Maxwell Perkins, editor of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ring Lardner, and Thomas Wolfe, stands forth as the only widely recognized member of the tribe. This is largely a result of an extended fictional portrait of Perkins in Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, Malcolm Cowley's *New Yorker* profile of him in 1944, and A. Scott Berg's popular 1978 biography. As any reader of *Editor to Author*, a collation of Perkins's superb editorial letters, may



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attest, Perkins was a giant and a virtuoso of his craft. He was also an eccentric, driven and somehow *pre-modern* man in his tastes and working habits, a hero of culture, but one seemingly displaced from the nineteenth century. The equation of Maxwell Perkins with book editing has led to endless misconceptions about the proper function of the book editor, especially in regard to the editor's role as the writer's collaborator and literary conscience. Even today most book editors do somewhat the same job as Maxwell Perkins, but in the same sense that most basketball players are doing something similar to what Michael Jordan is doing. Still, it is an interesting thought experiment to imagine Perkins working (or trying to work) in today's publishing world. It is hard to feature.

Certainly visions of Perkins-esque exploits danced in my head as I prepared to enter my first editorial meeting as a green and poignantly eager and idealistic assistant editor at age twenty-eight. (Nobody above the age of twenty-five should ever care as much about a new job as I did.) Largely by fast talking I had weaseled my way into a position with a very large mass market paperback publisher, one with a deep and highly profitable backlist of paperback literary classics and highbrow nonfiction works aimed at the high school and college markets. These were the books I was meant to work on and augment. My bookshelves were riddled with books bearing this publisher's colophon, many of them by real live American authors, and so I anticipated at least some involvement with the hot, steaming literary and intellectual material I read about so eagerly in the *New York Times Book Review*. That anticipation was confirmed when I was given Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and William Gass's *The World Within the Word*, a collection of critical essays, to read for paperback reprint consideration in the week before I was to begin work. I fairly swooned with delight when handed these books, which were by two figures I then regarded as demigods of American criticism. This was even better than I had dared hope. Oh boy oh boy oh boy. . . .

As it happened, the weekly editorial meeting was held on each Monday at 9:30 A.M. So, with no preparation whatsoever, I was tossed into it in my first hour on the job like an infant into the drink. Suddenly I was in a large room with some fifteen other people around a table, a long log of submissions to be discussed, and barely a clue about the real rules of the proceedings about to take place here. With startling swiftness there began a bewildering discourse, understood intimately by everybody but me, a kind of verbal publishing shorthand compounded of first names and a semi-technical vocabulary (first prints, early look, floor bid, closing date) and a collegial back-room air. Largely absent from the discussion was much reference at all to the actual contents of the books, let alone their cultural significance, their contributions, if any, to the



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world of literature and ideas. By the time *Illness as Metaphor* came up for discussion I was thoroughly disoriented, and whatever fine insights I may have mentally prepared myself to deliver had evaporated under an onslaught of anxiety. I stammered out a few jumbled and perfectly ineffective sentences and then, sensing my utter failure to communicate the book's importance, played what I felt was my only card left: "It will probably be nominated for the National Book Award." (Her previous book, *On Photography*, had won the award some months earlier.)

The reaction was swift, but not what I had anticipated: an editor on the other side of the table snorted sarcastically, "Well, *that* will sell a lot of books."

My performance on behalf of Gass's book was little better. I did say, somewhat apologetically this time, that I thought that it, too, would be nominated for an NBA, a remark that carried the same absence of force in that forum. Needless to say, my employer declined to offer a red cent to reprint either of the books.

There is something to be said for having the stuffing knocked out of you on your first entry into the ring, I suppose. Since that time I've attended several hundred editorial meetings and run quite a few myself, and I now know just what I would have said under the same circumstances. (Gass's book was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, and Sontag's book went nominationless, incidentally, but contrary to my new colleague's disdainful remark, an astute publisher, hardcover or paperback, can most certainly use the aroma of prestige such a citation imparts as a tool to sell books.) But I had not fallen into a pit of philistinism; I had simply encountered the world of commercial publishing as a quiveringly unprepared naïf. The shorthand did not necessarily imply disdain for content; it was just a way of cutting to the business heart of the matter. What I heard at that big paperback house did not differ radically from what I have later encountered at the editorial meetings of two distinguished hardcover imprints. That the publishing process can very well chill the blood of the uninitiated does not imply an absence of seriousness on the part of the participants, editors emphatically included. To paraphrase Bismarck's *mot* about the law, it is with books as it is with sausage: if you like the stuff, it's best not to watch it being made.

The point I wish to make is that book editing is not now and never has been a pursuit that permits a narrow purism. F. Scott Fitzgerald characterizes his film producer hero Monroe Stahr in *The Last Tycoon* as one of the few people who can hold the whole complex equation of filmmaking in his head at once; it might be said that good editors do something similar with the publishing equation. Their ministrations extend equally to the narrow compass of the page of text where the



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reader will experience the book and the wide cultural and commercial arena where the book itself must find its way; their fealty is equally to the spiritual, emotional, and financial well-being of the authors they publish and the firms that employ them. One might say that the effective editor is on comfortable terms with God and with Mammon. The great Max Perkins also published Taylor Caldwell and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. Probably the most remunerative book ever published by Alfred A. Knopf was Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* (over 8 million copies sold in this country alone, and climbing still), and the ultra-prestigious firm that bears Knopf's name is known in the book trade for its top-of-the-culinary-line cookbooks and for the commercial éclat with which it publishes glossy show business memoirs. The firm of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, publisher of several Nobel Prize winners and generally regarded as the most purely literary house in the country, pulled itself out of the red in 1950 after four financially lackluster years by publishing Gaylord Hauser's best-selling *Look Younger, Live Longer*; it is currently happily awash in the incredible revenues generated by Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent* and Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. I could cite dozens of similar examples with ease.

I perhaps overemphasize the point about book editing, even at the highest level of practice, having a lot to do with money and promotion and gamesmanship and overall business sense because these are the aspects of the craft that the public least understands or cares to recognize. The other part, the priesthood-of-literature aspect, well, that certainly exists; that is the star by which the serious editor sets his course, but it is also something primary and largely irreducible and unsusceptible to explanation. The code is simple, really. Be loyal to your authors. Nurture the best that is in them and give them the best that is in you—including sticking by them in lean times. Publish the best writing that you can find or that finds you. Don't send books to the printer that you know can be made better. Be proud of the firm and give it books that the firm can be proud to publish. If you have to or want to publish some junk or sheer product (it happens), don't represent your dross as gold. Honor the past while remaining alert to what is new and interesting and valuable and maybe upsetting to conventional taste—and have the guts to publish it. Don't fall into the all-too-available smugness about who and what will sell—and about your own infallibility. Strive to be the kind of editor your younger, hopelessly literary self wanted to be. Book editing, like politics, at its most fulfilling engages the participant at a very deep, test-of-character level, and that is what makes it worth doing.

On the good days (and for me most of them are good), I believe all that. On the bad days, I feel like a self-victimizing chump for believing it. On the bad days, the days when another venerable American house is



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neutron-bombed by the mindless conglomerate that enfolded it, or a Big Name in the Lit Biz has deserted his longtime publisher for a big fat check from Long Green and Gotrocks, or an agent has slammed the wind out of me with a punishing demand for money on a book my soul cries out to publish, on those days I decide that literature is the very last thing that publishing is about. I decide that publishing is about power and money and ego and sharp practice and staying ahead of the unearned advances while fanning the flames of memory under your successes. On the bad days I seriously ask myself why I should care so much about a totally uncodified and thoroughly outmoded set of standards and ethics when so many others appear to be doing so well without them—and all of it in the service of a form of cultural transmission unlikely to be in existence much beyond my lifespan. As Bugs Bunny says, What a maroon.

I usually get over it fairly quickly. A sense of humor helps. There are, however, more and more of those bad days for editors to get over. The shape of the publishing landscape changes, sometimes drastically, almost every week. The players change partners with the frequency of a square dance; the houses change ownership with the indignity of a bankruptcy sale. The prevailing atmosphere is very much one of high capitalism characteristic of the late Reagan era: all of a sudden there seems to be this incredible amount of money around, sales are going up and up, but nobody feels secure because it all might go bust tomorrow, because we might very well all be living beyond our means. You know, that homeless in Trump Tower feeling. The precious basics of the editor's craft—time, security, loyalty, a shared understanding of literary and intellectual values and financial *value*—become less and less dependably available as stronger and stronger gusts of change sweep through the business. The forward march of culture begins to feel like a rear-guard action, and purely literary values begin to look entirely beside the point of a larger, colder, scarily expensive game. When one reaches the point, as I have on numerous occasions, of having to decide during an auction whether the paperback rights to a first collection of short stories or a first novel are worth many, many tens or several hundreds of thousands of dollars, one's fine discriminations tend to feel awfully fussy and irrelevant. But then, when a van Gogh or Monet or Gauguin is going right through the roof at Sotheby's, the curator doesn't interrupt the proceedings to remind the crowd that the work in question is not from the artist's strongest period.

I've spent a good deal of time brooding over the possible reasons why things seem so badly out of whack—why, to put it bluntly, publishers are behaving so stupidly and self-destructively in some instances, and so peculiarly shortsightedly overall. There is no one primal cause for the



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transformations all have witnessed and many question and deplore (it suits others just fine, of course), any more than one can explain simply why mergers and acquisitions became the major-league sport of Wall Street. World historical forces are clearly at work. From my point of view down in the editorial trenches, however, I think I can isolate a few broad developments, all working in concert to reinforce one another, that have caused huge distortions and discontinuities in the way publishers in general and editors in particular go about their business.

Pride of place must of course go to the by-now almost exclusively *corporate* nature of American publishing (I exclude from this discussion the university presses and the hundreds of small presses, whose nature, influence, and problems require a totally separate inquiry). Not very long ago, publishing houses tended to be family-owned and family-run businesses, with the founder or the founder's descendants at the helm. Scribner's was run by a Scribner, Putnam's by a Putnam, Doubleday by a Doubleday, Simon and Schuster by a Simon and a Schuster. Even where a specifically family connection to management no longer existed, as in the case of Little, Brown, Harper and Row, and Houghton Mifflin, the houses remained closely held entities, and trade publishing itself formed something of a peculiar archipelago off the continent of corporate America, subject to the same economic weather but governed by its own insular rules. Do not imagine this island nation as paradise, by any means, only as a reasonably stable confederation where change came slowly and business proceeded at a comparatively stately pace.

The philosophers tell us that man has fallen into the quotidian; it may be said that publishing at some point fell into the fiscal—the early-to-mid sixties is the likely starting date. One by one the great trade houses sold themselves to the conglomerates and the huge communications concerns, and so ceded, whether they recognized it or not, the control of their own destiny. On the side of the houses, the impetus for the sale varied. In some cases the founders or their heirs found themselves getting on in years and no longer vigorous enough or committed enough to handle the business of the firm properly. So in effect they cashed out their interests for a handsome price. In other instances the independent houses believed that allying themselves with powerful corporate owners would solve the perennial problems of modest concerns—cash flow and capital shortage—and allow them to ride out the inevitable lean seasons cushioned by the corporation's substantial assets against the squeeze of high inflation and interest rates. Better to go to the friendly corporate owner than the possibly unfriendly banker or the impersonal capital markets for the necessary funds, the logic went. On the conglomerates' side, these houses, controlling as they did substantial literary properties and themselves brand names of widespread recognition, offered a highly



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cost-effective entry into what everybody saw as a growth industry, now that a vast new generation of Americans was in the process of becoming college-educated and thus, it was assumed, lifelong readers.

At the heart of these sales lay a terrible misunderstanding. The trade houses thought they would run their business as they had before, with similar independence of taste and action, safely cocooned within their conglomerates. The corporations, however, with far less naïvete, expected and insisted that their new assets adopt the same financial lockstep as their other assets, show quarterly growth, institute strict managerial controls—the shareholders expected no less. God, as usual, was with the big battalions, and today almost all the houses bearing the great names in American publishing are either huge corporations themselves or smoothly integrated into vast corporate combines. They now dance to the tune of big-time finance, and it's not a fox-trot; it's a bruising slam dance.

From down here on the shop floor, the results often look ludicrous and disastrous. Publishers are playing a big-money game with comparatively minuscule resources. On the map of corporate America as a whole, trade publishing commands such a small portion of the consumer dollar that it is barely visible. Let me illustrate the point. The January 1989 issue of *Manhattan, inc.* reports that Nintendo Video Entertainment was the toy industry's top-selling product in 1988, grossing $2.3 billion. The net income to Nintendo from that one toy (assume 50 percent of gross) amounts to more than a quarter of the income of the entire trade book industry, which was $4.4 billion last year. What conceivable clout can even a $100 million company wield in such an environment? On the southern tip of Manhattan, twenty-five-year-olds in bright red suspenders buy and sell such concerns the way kids trade baseball cards—and with less feeling for the object in question.

No wonder, then, that publishers are demonstrating an almost inexorable tendency to huddle together in self-protective combinations, to weather the financial storms and preserve some autonomy of action. No wonder they are reaching out to create global publishing empires. Simon and Schuster, under the capacious Gulf and Western umbrella, now includes the Simon and Schuster imprint, Pocket Books, Poseidon, Prentice-Hall, Fireside, Touchstone, and a long list of subsidiaries. Random House, itself owned by the Newhouse family, which also owns *The New Yorker* and the Condé Nast magazine empire, controls Random House Trade, Alfred A. Knopf, Pantheon (which includes Schocken), Villard, the paperback imprints Ballantine, Vintage, and Fawcett, and recently concluded the purchase of one of the few remaining owner-run houses, Crown Publishing—itself a considerable nest of imprints and divisions and a highly profitable concern. On the other side of the pond,



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Random House has established a substantial presence in British publishing by purchasing the venerable houses of Jonathan Cape, Chatto and Windus, and The Bodley Head, thereby making feasible the purchase and implementation of worldwide publishing rights in the English language. The latter is a special strength of my old employer, Penguin Books, which doth bestride the globe like a colossus and which, in this country, controls Viking, New American Library, E. P. Dutton . . . I can't go on.

I'll learn from the example of King Canute and spare myself a plea that all this merger activity stop. But even when such major reshufflings are handled sensitively and efficiently, there must of necessity be a disquieting interregnum of new managers, shifts in publishing philosophy, rerouting of the lines of communication and hierarchies of authority. At its worst a blind corporate stupidity descends upon a house, a reign of chaos in the putative name of profit and rationalization that in very swift order leads to the demoralization of the staff and the final destruction of its publishing identity and mission. Some of these latter cases are willful, others the simple result of putting the management of the finely tuned entity that is a top-flight publishing house in the hands of apes in suits. (One of the finest literary editors in American publishing was given his walking papers with the contemptuous remark, "You're a six-thousand-copy editor," six thousand being about the lowest feasible printing for the average book. O sweetest of ironies, though, his first acquisition for his next employer sold about a million copies in hardcover!) The effect of all this on serious book editors scarcely needs spelling out. Suffice it to say that they move around a lot these days from house to house, hoping to stay a few steps ahead of the whirlwind, searching for the diminishing solid and stable places where they can hang out their shingles for a few years and do some good publishing.

The loss of an editor is almost always a shock to the writer, for it is the rare writer indeed who can write a book in splendid isolation and autonomy; and once the book is done, the writer must depend on the editor to guide the book through the course of its preparation for publication. The Brownian motion among the editorial class has resulted in a situation where many fine writers no longer feel they can *afford* any particular loyalty to a single publishing house. They've been taught the core lesson in modern corporate American life: expendability. Lately they've been learning another lesson as well, one writ large in the massive prices paid for corporate buyouts and objets d'art alike: that value is an exceedingly variable quality, its assessment highly dependent upon circumstance and subject to all manner of manipulation. The loss of heart suffered by many editors is paralleled by a similar decline of faith on the part of the writers that the writing itself will be enough,



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that the artistic act will suffice, without assiduous attention to literary politics, public presentation, and publishing strategy.

We enter here into highly ironic territory. The conventional wisdom of the early eighties was that the rise of corporate publishing and the mirror-image growth of the huge book retailing chains could spell the end of serious writing and publishing—that so much time and money and effort would be expended in putting under contract and marketing the sure commercial thing the accountants demanded that nothing would be left over for the risky, the new, the demanding work. (See Thomas Whiteside's *The Blockbuster Complex* for this argument in its purest form.) Oddly enough, something quite the opposite has happened: these days nothing is hotter, nothing more sought after than the prestige property, the fresh new face and voice. For that let us thank God, for a world full of Ludlums and Kings and Steels and Sheldons alone is not a world worth living in.

There are a variety of reasons behind this development. I would first cite a saving conservatism in the book business and in book culture, a saving remnant of people at all levels and in all areas of publishing whose commitment to quality has never flagged and whose energy on behalf of good books (and inventiveness) knows no bounds. Then there was the at first bewildering and later inspiriting best-selling success of such unlikely books as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, which demonstrated the heretofore unsuspected existence of a genuinely mass market willing to purchase, if not finish reading, works of obvious difficulty. Apparently the same vast distribution mechanism that channels oceans of schlock can be used to deliver the better class of goods in heroic numbers. Lastly, a crop of new writers of quality and freshness arose whose first books managed to find an audience sufficient to put their books on the best-seller lists and to indicate the rise, among writers and readers alike, of something like a new generation. These books include Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, Ethan Canin's *Emperor of the Air*, David Leavitt's *Family Dancing*, Tama Janowitz's *Slaves of New York*, Mona Simpson's *Anywhere But Here*, Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, and Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*. Each of these books was a legitimate best-seller; each of these authors was under the age of thirty-five when he or she published his or her first book, and a couple of them were barely past twenty-one; and two of these books were short-story collections, utterly confounding conventional publishing wisdom about the commercial difficulties such books should face.

This is all very fine, in that it gives serious writers and their editors confidence and heart and clout as they write and publish. The world will not end with a five-part mini-series, at least not yet. But there is a



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palpable Faustian element to the bargain: the huge distribution mechanism and the celebrity-hungry media machine that function to make these splashy successes possible extract their own costs and compromises and create much confusion of literary values and financial value.

Among the younger writers these days one can observe a great deal more career ambition—an itchiness to get it now—than purely literary ambition. Far from offering any resistance to the mighty engines and subtle strategies of contemporary success, they eagerly embrace and employ them. In this regard they are only mirroring the behavior of their contemporaries in business and financial services who reportedly sense failure if they haven't made their first million by the age of twenty-seven. The eighties have not been a decade noted for patience. The proliferation of creative writing programs has made possible *ab ovo* a career management approach to literature. Go to the right college, get into the right MFA program, make the right contacts among established writers and book and magazine editors, find the right literary agent, who'll sell your book to the right publisher, who'll give your book the right cover and shake down the right writers (some of whom you already know, of course) for the right blurbs, and you're off ! You get the good review from Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, the paperback reprinters and Hollywood producers begin throwing money at your book, the hip nightclubs beckon, the galleys begin to arrive asking *you* for blurbs, you guest teach at the right creative writing program, you summer at Yaddo or McDowell . . . everything is on track and on time.

And, very possibly, out of scale. What nobody will tell the hot young writers, least of all their editors, is that however fresh or unusual their first books were, they may have a long way to travel before they develop mastery of their craft. (That news may be delivered, brutally, by reviewers of the second book.) The system that helps make these talented young people also exploits them and can possibly destroy them. They may be living in a flashy Potemkin village of their agents' and publishers' construction. What the showy early success removes is the possibility of a slow, even fitful progress towards artistic maturity, well away from the harsh spotlight and the demands of an impersonal star system. The Muse does not speak on the Bitch Goddess's schedule, and for many writers the most precious gift of all is not a big fat book contract, but the space and time to find their unique style and subject, to learn from an honorable failure, perhaps, without being tossed on the ash heap for it.

What also seems to have departed from the world for the moment is the desire among young writers to create the masterpiece, the total work that, whether gorgeously compressed or encyclopedically vast, seems to say all that must or can be said at its particular moment. Once upon a



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time (1944) Cyril Connolly could write, to general agreement: "The more books we read, the clearer it becomes that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence." To live by such words is to cultivate an imperial contempt for the mundane, for the world and its shabby workings. It is impossible, I believe, for an attitude of proud self-sufficiency such as cultivated by a Lawrence or a Joyce or a Beckett to coexist with an eagerness to play ball with the literary star search. It is certainly impossible for an editor to expect his young author to make the complete spiritual and artistic commitment the creation of a masterpiece demands when he has previously ascribed cultural authority to the system of hype. The masterpiece, almost by definition, is written outside this system.

Implicit in the above remarks, of course, is the assumption that the main event happens on the page, not in the gossip columns and on the celebrity circuit. This assumption is not one shared universally by writers and publishers. At the baroque end of the spectrum of literary decay stands Tama Janowitz, a figure one could find poignantly pathetic if she were not so annoying. Having gone to school on Andy Warhol, Janowitz proceeded to promote her genuinely fresh collection of stories, *Slaves of New York*, with shrewd shamelessness—the writer as photo opportunity, the self-huckster as literary waif. Her publishers were delighted to play along: as her publicist averred, "Tama's too fabulous to waste on the book pages." The so-called promotability of an author—one with an interesting personal story, a mediagenic profile, a set of powerful friends, a snappy line of patter—is routinely taken into consideration by publishers these days and may well obscure certain literary failings in the work even as it enhances its dollar value. Shall we call these young writers Capote's Children?

The itch for the big score, the Faustian willingness to strike a bargain with the devil, does not confine itself to the younger set; it is common as well among older writers, even those who have tried to live by Connolly's dictate. This is very understandable, for such writers will have seen on the one hand staggering sums paid over to the hacks of the best-seller list, and on the other disproportionate praise and attention (and money) lavished on the upstart of the moment. Meanwhile, they must labor away, it seems, in prestigious obscurity, and it is all very galling. Little wonder, then, that some of these writers decide that writing well is insufficient revenge, that a system so manifestly incapable of matching reward to merit deserves to be subverted and manipulated. I believe that a number of important American writers have made some such conscious internal decision to maneuver cold-bloodedly for the big time, and I cannot say that I blame them. Their publishers are most likely parts of huge corporations, they've probably had too many editors in their



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careers to depend on them very much, the faith that art can save your soul is a quaint and dying creed, the surrounding literary culture is thin and fragmented and unsustaining—why subsist on such thin gruel as a prestigious literary career? So off these writers go with their work into the open market, a move usually orchestrated by a shrewd and powerful agent (about whom more in a moment), and sure enough, the classy scent these authors give off proves to be a powerful financial aphrodisiac. The rupture, in some cases, of publishing relationships of long standing can seem a small price to pay for such largesse.

Let me be specific. Up until fairly recently, William Gaddis was known to a pretty small circle of cognoscenti as the author of two massive, dense, and demanding masterpieces, *The Recognitions* and *JR*. These works make absolutely no compromise with the reader as they attack the question of authenticity in the modern age, and they have sold over the years in modest numbers at best. Last year, after publication by Viking of a relatively short and, by Gaddis's standards, accessible novel, *Carpenter's Gothic*, Gaddis and his agent put on the block a proposal for his next and probably last novel, *The Last Act*, a work about the American legal system—and everything else. I know, because I read it for Viking and offered on it. As reported in *Publishers Weekly* (and much discussed on the Rialto), the work was knocked down to Simon and Schuster for $275,000, an amount that makes no sense whatsoever unless you understand that Simon and Schuster was simply purchasing the prestige of publishing one of the few certifiable geniuses (in my view) in current American fiction. The book that Gaddis will write will, I am quite certain, be brilliant, and Gaddis deserves the money and more. But save for some kind of miracle, Simon and Schuster will be quite deeply in the red at the end of the day. It indicates how thoroughly unmoored ends have become from means in the corporate era of publishing.

Other writers of stature have grasped the essence of celebrity culture, none more egregiously than the novelist Harold Brodkey. He has so adroitly broadcast the unbounded ambition behind his long-awaited and long-undelivered magnum opus, *A Party of Animals*, and the angst of his life and its creation that respected critics proclaim the work a masterpiece and Brodkey a presiding genius of twentieth-century American fiction *before they have even read it*. The mixed reviews that Brodkey's recent collection, *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode*, has received did not deter *New York* and *People* from profiling Brodkey and his unhappy childhood and his peculiar adulthood. Meanwhile, *A Party of Animals* has over its twenty-five-year gestation period accumulated an ever thicker layer of advance payments from various publishers; his current one, Knopf, has sunk well over half a million dollars into it. Whatever one makes of Brodkey's talent on the basis of what has already seen print



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(I find him hard, obsessive going for the most part), a *reductio ad absurdum* of the cult of tortured literary creation has been reached here, possibly the most handsomely rewarded instance of writer's block in literary history. Brodkey has made his very inability to create a sign of his genius; what he is selling is not literature so much as the *idea* of literature. Here is the notion of artistic struggle retooled for the age of intellectual property. Somewhere out there Andy Warhol is applauding.

Little wonder, then, that, in a situation where the writers are so eager to receive and the publishers so eager to give, the literary agents have moved to the center stage of what Ted Solotaroff calls "the literary-industrial complex." Only agents intimately familiar with the territory can orchestrate the complex and often expensive courtship dance between writer and publisher. Only agents who have behind them the clout of their own lists of blockbusting authors can hope to counterbalance the immense power of conglomerate publishers on their clients' behalf. Only agents with a network of well-established connections and years of professional experience can maximize for an author the potentially enormous income to be realized from the complex web of subsidiary rights—foreign, film, dramatic, audio-visual, information retrieval, and so on. Finally, in a culture where the idea of the art object often substitutes for or takes precedence over the object itself, agents serve as the spin doctors of literature, shaping the idea of the book and the author for public consumption. These are the facts, and there is no arguing against them.

For the editor, however, the centrality of the agent in the writer's life has come in part at his expense. It is the rare agent who will become as intimately involved as the editor in the crafting of the work, and that seems a structural feature of the business. But with the ceaseless movement in the corporate ownership of houses and in editorial staff, the agent becomes by default the still point of the turning world for the writer as well as the source of his financial salvation or triumph. Most writers these days are glad to forgo 10 or 15 percent of their income in exchange for the agent's going to the mat with the publishers and wrestling out of them the last dollar of advance money. The agents are quite good at this, of course, and it allows the writer and publisher to live within the convenient fiction that the lethal street fight masquerading as a contract negotiation never took place.

What very few people say explicitly is that publishers are scared stiff of the powerful agents—that the million-dollar contracts you read about are paid over with silent screams. Agents are the direct beneficiaries of the decline of understanding of financial cause and effect among corporate-owned publishers, for the checks always clear but the returns and the losses stay with the publisher. In almost every book negotiation



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these days is the spoken or unspoken threat that if the terms are not satisfactory, there is some other publisher who would be delighted to pay the asking price—and there usually is. A superb publication of the author's previous work is often used *against* you: every editor has had the experience of an agent reminding him in a negotiation that "there are a lot of people out there interested in ———'s work" when it is the sweat equity and promotional money and publishing smarts you and your firm have applied to ———'s last book, as much as the literary quality of the work itself, that created the interest.

The editor occupies a diminishing space in the midst of these developments. The writer may feel great personal loyalty and gratitude for the editor's intimate understanding and stalwart sponsorship of his work, but such bonds are divisible. The writer's life is a precarious one, the vagaries of taste and talent and the marketplace impossible to predict. If the writer finds himself in the happy (and still relatively rare) position of being a highly sought-after commodity, well, the agent is there to do the nasty work, with the writer in effect saying, "I'm sorry that things have worked out this way, but I'll always be grateful for your help." After all, Thomas Wolfe left Scribner's and Max Perkins and broke the great man's heart, but he did write him that nice Valentine in *You Can't Go Home Again*.

This is what it looks like from here, the editor's uneasy chair. It is damned peculiar out there, and damned Hobbesian—what used to be known as a gentlemen's profession has been transformed into a war of all against all. It is impossible to imagine that august figure Max Perkins working happily or even successfully in this world, for *his* values—loyalty, honesty, taste, proportion, Olympian standards—are not always negotiable currency these days. They have not disappeared from publishing—after all, Robert Giroux still shows up for work at Farrar, Straus and Giroux on Union Square—but they surely do not mean what they once did. Editors of my generation and younger (I'm thirty-eight) are resigned to and cynically humorous about the departure of a particular sort of grace from our world, intensely grateful when we encounter instances of it, and determined to emulate it to the extent that conditions will allow. We've learned the rules of the rough new games being played—or rather, the absence of rules—but a lot of us don't like the lessons we're being taught.

The heart of darkness at the center of today's publishing world is not a jungle. Rather, it is a flashy, disorienting environment, a combination hall of mirrors, MTV video, commodities pit, cocktail party, soap opera, circus, fun house, and three-card monte game. The message one emerges with, stunned and shaken by what one has witnessed, is: "Mistah Perkins—he dead."



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# *A Memorial: Son Bret*

WILLIAM STAFFORD

In the way you went you were important.
I do not know what you found.
In the pattern of my life you stand
where you stood always, in the center,
a hero, a puzzle, a man.

What you might have told me
I will never know—the lips went still,
the body cold. I am afraid,
in the circling stars, in the dark,
and even at noon in the light.

When I run what am I running from?
You turned once to tell me something,
but then you glimpsed a shadow on my face
and maybe thought, why tell what hurts?
You carried it, my boy, so brave, so far.

Now we have all the days, and the sun
goes by the same; there is a faint,
wandering trail I find sometimes, off
through grass and sage. I stop
and listen, only summer again—remember?—

The bees, the wind.

✪ WILLIAM STAFFORD's most recent books are a collection of poetry entitled *An Oregon Message* and a book about writing, *You Must Revise Your Life.*



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# The Costs of the French Revolution

CHARLES ISSAWI

THIS YEAR THE WORLD IS CELEBRATING, with much enthusiasm, the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. In this it is continuing a tradition that was begun by the finest poets of their age—Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron, Shelley, Schiller, and, in his cooler and more detached way, Goethe, as witnessed by his remarks at the battle of Valmy on the dawn of a new era and in some conversations with Eckermann. Wordsworth's

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive
> But to be young was very Heaven

is very well known; Byron's

> . . . Revolution
> Alone can save the earth from hell's pollution

is equally characteristic of the period, and Shelley is full of quotable lines.

It was not only poets who were thus affected; Charles James Fox exclaimed: "How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world! And how much the best." Several other statesmen such as Sheridan were also favorably inclined; even Pitt was, for a couple of years, somewhat charitable.

The achievements of the Revolution were great and have received their due. But like all human events, it had its costs, which have attracted far less attention. It seems worthwhile to point out and assess these costs. To what extent they offset the positive aspects must be left to the reader to judge.

The first and most obvious was the loss of life through Revolutionary

✪ CHARLES ISSAWI is Bayard Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. He is the author of, among other books, *The Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* and *The Fertile Crescent, 1800–1914*.



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violence. First there was the terror of 1793–94. An eminent French historian, Pierre Goubert, sums it up as follows: " . . . Paris, where over 2,000 persons were guillotined in 16 months. Of the 14,000 victims who have been fully identified, less that 15 percent were nobles and clergymen and nearly 60 percent workers and peasants. Adding the killings in Vendée, the number of victims was well over a hundred thousand, perhaps close to twice that figure. Passion, hatred and folly contributed as much as national necessity, which cannot be ignored." And, of course, there were many executions, and many more deportations, after the fall of Robespierre.

These figures are appalling, but to keep them in perspective, they should be compared to France's total population of about twenty-seven million. And it is worth recalling Shelley's admonition, in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam,* not to condemn the Revolution just "because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquillity of freemen as soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened." Moreover, a certain logic of all revolutions should be noted. Once they have begun—usually in violence—they evoke counter-revolutionary violence, which makes further violence unavoidable if the revolutionary momentum is to be maintained.

To this should be added the casualties of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, probably over one million Frenchmen—a figure calculated by a count of casualties in Napoléon's wars and checked by the deficiency of one million men compared to women in the age-group of twenty to fifty-nine year olds in a reconstituted population pyramid of France for 1815. The combined casualties of France's enemies were probably of a similar order of magnitude, and losses among civilians on both sides must have also been very high. War was not a novelty in France, and the losses involved in the wars of Louis XIV, although distinctly smaller, were not of a different order of magnitude. But, unlike the Bourbon wars, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars did not result in any permanent extension of France's frontiers. In fact, she lost her remaining colonies, which had been an important source of income (see below), and her fleet was wiped out. Again to quote Goubert: "After Aboukir, mourning for Trafalgar would be observed by our sailors for over a century."

In addition to the quantitative, there were qualitative losses. The terror was responsible for the deaths of Lavoisier, Europe's greatest scientist; André Chénier, France's leading poet; Vicq d'Azyr, her leading physician; Condorcet, her leading philosopher; and Olympe de Gouges, her most prominent feminist. Other notable writers—among them Chateaubriand, Mme de Staël, Rivarol, and, eventually, Benjamin



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Constant—went into exile. Moreover, the rigors of the Revolution and Napoléon's censorship had a chilling effect on literature, and no noteworthy poetry or prose (except for Napoléon's own despatches) was written. On the other hand, the gorgeous flowering of French literature in the 1820s certainly owes something to the Revolutionary glow as well as to English Romanticism, which in turn had felt the same impulse.

Another loss, minor and unnoticed, may be mentioned: under the Directory a very large number of castles and churches, including some fine monuments, were demolished and their remains carted away. However, considering the prodigious architectural wealth of France, one need not attach too much importance to this particular loss.

An authoritative, and sympathetic, historian, Charles Gillispie, states: "Indeed in what is now called high culture [philosophy, literature, fine arts, music] the quarter century between 1789 and 1815 is to be graphed as the bottom of a trough between the elevated plateaus of the Enlightenment and the 19th century." But there was an important exception. As Gillispie immediately adds: "Only in one domain were French names at the forefront in the world at large, and that domain was science," more particularly in physics and biology but also in chemistry and other sciences. Beginning around the middle of the eighteenth century, the Royal Academy of Science had done superb work in both encouraging individual scientists and organizing scientific work. Several specialized "grandes écoles" were founded, such as, Mines, Génie, and Ponts et Chaussées. The Jacobins were hostile to the mathematical, mechanical sciences and in 1793 suppressed the Academy and, as noted, executed many of its leading members. But, under the Directory, the Academy was reconstituted under the name of Institut de France, and in addition Polytechnique and other Grandes Ecoles were founded. Napoléon—the only head of government before the twentieth century who had received a scientific education—also greatly encouraged science. The brilliant younger scientists (Ampère, Fresnel, Fourier, Poisson, Cuvier, Sadi Carnot, and others), as well as survivors of the Royal Academy (Laplace, Monge, and Berthollet), rendered great services to the French state, ranging from the production of gunpowder to the survey of Egypt.

The Convention and Directory also had far-reaching plans—many taken over from the reformers of the Ancien Régime—for universal primary and secondary education, and in 1795 an early version of the Ecole Normale was established for teacher training. But Napoléon was far from enthusiastic, and implementation of these schemes had to wait for several decades. The initial influence of the Revolution on education was surely disruptive, but this was soon rectified, and the tendencies prevailing under the old régime—notably nationalization and modernization of education—were soon resumed. In R. R. Palmer's words: "For



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the mass of the population, at the level of elementary schooling, very little had changed; the rate of basic literacy in 1820, as already noted, stood about where it might have been expected without the Revolution, on a curve that had been rising since the time of Louis XIV, and probably before." But more was done for secondary education.

The major political costs of the Revolution were over-centralization and the splitting of the country into Red and Black. As Tocqueville pointed out, centralization had begun long before and had been vigorously pursued by Richelieu and his successors. As Tocqueville also saw, the Jacobins and Napoléon carried the process much further, partly no doubt because of the wars. It is generally agreed that France became over-centralized and was deprived of the invigorating presence of strong provincial governments, as in the United States, Germany, and, later, Britain. Only in the last few decades has a serious attempt been made to decentralize France's government, its educational system, and other aspects of economic and social activity.

Some of the initial measures taken by the Revolution—particularly the persecution of the priests—and the civil war of 1793 split France into two irreconcilable camps: the secular Left, consisting mainly of bourgeois and urban workers, with its center in Paris; and the religious Right, consisting of aristocrats, bourgeois, and peasants and drawing its support from the provinces. The resulting clashes punctuate the history of the nineteenth century: the Three Glorious Days of July 1830, the February Revolution of 1848, the June Revolution of 1848 followed by the coup d'état of Napoléon III in 1851, and the Commune uprising of 1871. As Flaubert pointed out in *L'éducation sentimentale*, in 1848 everyone followed the tricolor, but each party was committed to only one of its constituent colors. Again and again the revolutionary groups in Paris tried to impose their will on the country, as they had done in 1793, but as the century wore on the weight of the provinces bore them down. The last such conflict was in 1968 and was far more peaceful than its predecessors. Since then the two sides have come together to an unprecedented degree, and it does not seem unwarranted to say that by now the wounds have healed. But for nearly two hundred years, they caused much pain to the body politic.

Of course there were some very important political gains, many of which are widely known and which will consequently just be mentioned here. First and foremost, there was national unity: one law covered the whole of France, instead of a multitude of provincial regulations; feudal dues were abolished; taxes became uniform; and all internal barriers, including tolls, were abolished. The Code Napoléon—work on which had started well before the Consulate—became a model for mankind,



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and so did the excellent metric system. Justice became more humane. Protestants and Jews were granted political equality with Catholics. Administration was streamlined—and became at once less expensive and more effective. Above all, the principle of constitutional limitations on executive power was accepted and, although at first almost wholly ignored in practice, eventually established itself in French political life. More immediately, social mobility greatly increased and careers became more open to talents.

Even these splendid achievements had their darker side. The grip of the state on the individual was tightened to a degree never achieved by the absolute monarchs. In particular, universal conscription—another French innovation that was widely adopted abroad—constituted a heavy burden. But, on balance, the vast majority of present-day observers would surely agree that, in the political field, the gains of the Revolution outweighed its costs.

In the economic field, however, the picture is very different. In the first place, the Revolutionary disruption and the almost uninterrupted wars represented a huge cost, both in the form of direct expenditures and in the opportunity costs of the hundreds of thousands of men mobilized and resources allocated to war purposes. According to Peter Mathias and Patrick O'Brien, between 1785 and 1807–8 the share of France's commodity output that was appropriated as taxes went up by 30 percent—the corresponding figure for Britain being over 50 percent. However, because of mass mobilization, the opportunity cost in France must have risen much more sharply than in Britain. Far more important, these events led to the retardation of economic growth and a sharp deterioration in the position of France relative to that of Britain, its only rival for hegemony.

Considerable quantitative work has been done in the last thirty years on the evolution of the French economy, which may be summarized as follows. In the "long seventeenth century" France suffered greatly from the civil wars, Louis XIV's wars, and the emigration of Protestants following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. As a result, its economy underwent considerable retardation compared to that of its main rivals, first the Netherlands and then Britain. From 1715 to 1789, however, France progressed at least as fast as Britain, no doubt partly because of its recovery from a lower level. Its foreign trade grew distinctly more rapidly than that of Britain. So did its agriculture—according to some estimates by 50 percent more, though this figure should not be pressed too hard, because of the shakiness of the statistics on which it is based. Yet there was more agricultural innovation in Britain than in France. Even in industry, the overall French rate of growth was higher, thanks mainly to the excellent performance of the woolen, linen, silk, and iron



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industries, while Britain did better in coal, shipbuilding, and, above all, cotton, where the new inventions were centered. By and large, it is agreed that the volume of physical production grew more rapidly in France, but this was at least partly offset by the far better performance of the financial and services sector in Britain. There also seems little doubt that whereas, in 1789, taken as a whole, the economy of France was much larger than that of Britain, per capita income in the latter was higher. It should be added that in both countries population rose at what were then high rates, with that of England and Wales being slightly above that of France.

The French Revolution, then, had a sharply adverse effect on the economy. The political upheavals, civil wars, confiscations, and currency depreciation disrupted business. Interest rates rose sharply, and investment probably declined. But these factors pale into insignificance compared to the effects of the foreign wars. The most immediate and harmful effect was on foreign trade. Within a very few years the Royal Navy had swept French ships and trade off the seas, and the British had taken France's colonies; simultaneously Haiti, "The Pearl of the Antilles," revolted and became independent. Subsequently blockades and counterblockades, Napoléon's Continental System and the British Orders in Council, practically eliminated France's overseas trade. The economic loss was most severe in trade with the Americas, which had been France's main overseas market, but it was equally dramatic in the Near East, also an important client. Before the Revolution, France accounted for more than half of the Ottoman Empire's trade with Europe; by 1815 France's share was negligible, and it was not until the 1840s that it again rose to a significant proportion.

The shrinkage in trade had cut deeply into industry. Many of France's leading manufacturing centers, such as Bordeaux, Nantes, Rouen, and Marseilles, were port cities that catered mainly to foreign markets and drew their raw materials (sugar, tobacco, cotton, etc.) from abroad. The resulting collapse was so great that Crouzet, followed by Wallerstein, uses the terms "definitive deindustrialization or pastoralization of vast regions—with, in many parts of France and the Low Countries, an appreciable transfer of capital from commerce and industry to agriculture." This was partly offset by the growth of the cotton spinning and weaving industries—which had begun to import machines from England as early as 1770—and of the metal-using and chemical industries. All these branches benefited greatly from the Continental Blockade, often at the expense of other European producers. The woolen industry, which had suffered greatly under the Revolution, also revived under Napoléon. For total industrial production, Crouzet suggests a decline from one hundred in the 1780s to sixty in 1800 and a recovery to



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at most ninety by 1810. In the meantime Britain was furiously industrializing and supplying overseas markets and, by 1815, had acquired a commanding lead that would not be overcome until the last few years, even though French industrial productivity advanced almost as fast as British. Already in 1801 Pitt, in a speech of November 3, had seen the situation very clearly: What France had gained in territory it had lost "in population, in commerce, in capital and in habits of industry."

It may be argued that British technological superiority would have ensured a similar outcome regardless of political and military developments, but this does not seem to be the opinion of most economic historians—among other reasons because the French were introducing many British machines and making others of their own. Well over a hundred years ago, Thiers stated: "We did not win the battle of Trafalgar. We did not remain masters of the seas and do not have 200 million consumers like England. Here is all the secret of our inferiority." But he should have gone back beyond Trafalgar, to the early 1790s.

As for agriculture, the main result of the Revolution and the subsequent wars was that of mass conscription and the acquisition of much land by the peasants. The loss of manpower must have adversely affected agricultural production and was not compensated by mechanization. The effects of redistribution of land were complex. Well before other European countries, France became a land of small peasant proprietors. This probably made its farming less responsive to agricultural improvement, such as was carried out by British landlords and Prussian junkers. Grain yields per acre on comparable land were distinctly lower in France than in England; moreover, for most cereals, yields per acre seem to have declined. Against that, however, must be set the social benefits of diffused and much less unequal landownership—a fact to which, perhaps more than any other, France owed its social stability throughout its successive nineteenth-century revolutions.

Peasant ownership is also generally believed to have been a major factor in sharply reducing the birth rate in France, the first such instance in the modern era. At the same time, the wars were not only killing off many potential husbands and fathers but probably leading to the postponement of many marriages, with a consequent decline in fertility. This resulted in a marked slowdown in population growth. From 1781 to 1789 France had nearly three times as many inhabitants as Britain (26.5 million against 9.4 million), but from 1815 to 1824 just over twice as many (30.5 million against 13.9 million), and by the end of the century, the two countries were dead even. This naturally meant that France's *overall* rate of growth was slowed down compared to that of its neighbors—Britain, Germany, and Italy—and that its total economic and military power was correspondingly reduced, a fact of which Frenchmen



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became painfully aware. But it does not follow that the French per capita rate of growth was reduced. The following table suggests that, after a sharp drop during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, the French rate of growth was as rapid as the British. One caveat is necessary: the table shows total *commodity* output, not gross national product—that is, it excludes the service sector. This was far larger in Britain than in France, and it meant that per capita incomes were also distinctly higher. Thanks partly to imports financed by such international services as banking, shipping, and insurance, the British had more goods at their disposal than the French and enjoyed a higher level of living.

Per Capita Commodity Output in Pounds Sterling

| Years | Great Britain | France* |
|---|---|---|
| 1781–89 | 6.9 | 7.94 – 9.53 |
| 1815–24 | 12.27 | 9.22 – 11.31 |
| 1865–74 | 17.64 | 17.92 – 19.33 |
| 1905–13 | 21.53 | 21.89 – 22.43 |

Slower population growth also had the effect of sharply reducing rural migration to the cities, so that France remained much less urbanized than Britain, Belgium, or Germany. This retarded industrialization by reducing both the available supply of workers (and therefore presumably preventing wages from falling) and the number of urban consumers. But here, too, the social effects were beneficial, for France was spared some of the horrors of early industrialization. The urban slums of Paris, Lille, and Lyons may have been as bad as those of Britain, but they were far more restricted. Most nineteenth-century French observers of England, including such admirers as Tocqueville and Taine, were horrified by the condition of the urban working class and the much greater inequality prevailing, and against the many debit entries attributable to the French Revolution must be set this large credit item.

Let us now consider, very briefly, the external effects of the Revolution. In his *Civilization and Ethics*, Albert Schweitzer provides an arresting image:

> The French Revolution is a snowstorm falling upon trees in blossom. A transformation which promises great things is in progress, but everywhere softly and slowly. Extraordinarily valuable results are being prepared in the thoughts

* The two figures for France show the results of converting at prices based on British output and on French output, respectively. (P. O'Brien and C. Keyder, *Economic Growth in Britain and France, 1780–1914* [London, 1978], p. 61.)



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of men. Provided that circumstances remain even tolerably near the no... there stands before humanity in Europe an extraordinarily desirable development. But in place of that there sets in a chaotic period of history in which the will-to-progress has to cease more or less completely from its work, and becomes a bewildered spectator.

The eighteenth century had been the age of enlightened despotism or, in Lord Acton's phrase, "the era of repentant monarchy." Almost everywhere the monarchs and their ministers—Frederick the Great in Prussia, Maria Theresa and Joseph II in Austria, Charles III and Florida Blanca in Spain, Joseph I and Pombal in Portugal, as well as the rulers of Tuscany and some other small states in Italy—had achieved much progress. Even in Russia, Catherine the Great had introduced some reforms. In the maritime countries—Britain, the Netherlands, and the United States—much more had been achieved. The nobility and the clergy had been deprived of some of their privileges, though only to a minor extent. Administration had become more humane, and in many places torture was abolished—or at least discredited. Toleration increased greatly, and the status of minorities—Protestants, Catholics, Jews—was significantly improved; paradoxically, the Jesuits were expelled from many countries, because of their intolerance. Steps were taken to extend education. Taxation became less arbitrary and attempts were made to develop the economy.

By contrast, the six or seven decades following the Revolution present a bleak picture. The rulers of Europe had been thoroughly shaken, and reaction replaced reform. Even in Britain, the movement to reform Parliament and other institutions was set back for four decades.

It could be countered that the Revolution may well have scared the ruling classes, but it surely radicalized the masses and increased their ardor. This is shown by the numerous revolts and revolutions that broke out in many parts of Europe after the Restoration. However, almost all of these revolutions, including those of 1848, were miserable failures. Under Metternich and his allies, reaction had the upper hand and it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that constitutional reforms were slowly carried out and liberalism began to flourish on the Continent.

One other important external effect of the Revolution should be noted: nationalism. The Revolution, the allied invasion, and the subsequent conquests greatly stimulated French nationalism. The same effect was soon felt in neighboring countries, especially Germany where, beginning with Fichte, nationalism arose in reaction to French domination. To pass a summary judgment on such a profound and complex phenomenon would be absurd, but one cannot help feeling that its effects were predominately malign.

This leads to a final question, which will make any respectable



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historian shudder: Was the French Revolution necessary? Would not its main achievements have come about anyway, in the course of a slow evolution: centralization, constitutional limitations on the monarchy, the acquisition of a greater share of power by the bourgeoisie, and a slowly widening suffrage, religious toleration, judicial and administrative reform, and the establishment of a legal system more favorable to capitalist expansion? The example of France's neighbors, Britain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and eventually Scandinavia—not to mention the United States, which was in an altogether different category—suggests that such an evolution was by no means impossible. So does Tocqueville, who wrote: "Si elle [the Revolution] n'eût pas eu lieu, le vieil édifice social n'en serait pas moins tombé partout, ici plus tôt, là plus tard; seulement il aurait continué à tomber pièce à pièce, au lieu de s'effondrer tout à coup. La Révolution à achevé soudainement, par un effort convulsif et douloureux, sans transition, sans précaution, sans égards, ce qui se serait achevé peu à peu de soi-même à la longue." The continued effects of the development of industry, commerce, and finance and of the ideas of the Enlightenment might well, by themselves, have abolished feudalism and created a political and social environment more favorable to capitalism. Even the transfer of the land, one of the Revolution's most spectacular achievements, had begun much earlier; as George Lefebvre points out, in 1789 the bourgeois probably owned as much land as the nobility.

Some important differences between France and its neighbors should be noted. First, commerce, industry, and finance played a distinctly smaller role in its economy than in those of the other countries, and the agrarian aristocracy was correspondingly stronger. The French aristocracy was much more reluctant to replenish its ranks from commerce and finance than was, say, the British—though it did recruit many members of the legal profession. France's Catholic church was far more powerful than the Protestant churches of other countries—though it should be noted that, in 1789, a substantial majority of the clergy (the lower ranks) voted to join the Third Estate, thus making possible the formation of the General Assembly, consisting of the three orders, and that many of the Cahiers presented by the clergy were radical in tone.

The fiscal difficulties of France were also far more serious than those of its neighbors. Attempts to regain solvency by increasing taxation and reducing expenditure had been repeatedly frustrated in the face of the extravagance of the Court and the refusal of the privileged classes to bear their share. The efforts of a distinguished group of reformers, including Turgot and Necker, had failed. In 1769, Burke—later the most implacable critic of the French Revolution—had stated in his *Observations on a Late Publication intituled "The Present State of the Nation":*



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> Under such extreme straightness and distraction labours the whole body of their finances, so far does their charge outrun their supply in every particular, that no man, I believe, who has considered their affairs with any degree of attention or information but must hourly look for some extraordinary convulsion in that whole system: the effect of which on France, and even on all Europe, it is difficult to conjecture.

And that was before the American War had greatly increased France's debt and fiscal burden.

Lastly, and most germanely, the Netherlands and England had had their revolutions—the first in the form of the revolt against Spain and the second in 1641 and 1688. Perhaps a revolution was a precondition for the emergence of a bourgeois, constitutional regime. Perhaps only a revolution could have shattered the old structures and produced a bourgeois society—though it should be immediately added that many influential contemporary historians emphatically deny that this was the result of the Revolution.

After two hundred years, the Revolution has worked itself out. The reforms and transformations it set out to achieve, and the ideas it sought to propagate, have long been accepted. For many decades now the Left has looked to other sources of inspiration. Similarly, the costs of the Revolution have been fully absorbed. The breach between the Red and the Black has been filled up, and France is no more divided today than is any other Western democracy. There has been some decentralization. The economic retardation caused by the Revolution has been fully made up, and France now stands at least level with Britain and very close to Germany. The 1789 Revolution was one of the greatest events in history, and, like other great events, it had its costs. Some of these were surely avoidable but others may well not have been. Whether they were excessive must be judged by each individual observer, using his own particular scales, which are likely to give different readings on different days.



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# *Fractals*†

DIANA DER-HOVANESSIAN

*Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare*
—Edna St. Vincent Millay

Euclid alone began to formulate
the relation of circle, plane and sphere
in equations making it quite clear
that symmetry is what we celebrate.

He left the jagged convoluted form
of rambling river, wind turbulence, rain,
the whorl of tree, skin and terrain.
He ignored clouds, coastline, storms

to map the triangle, cone and square.
Euclid measured order and left the knot
of chaos to be unraveled by Mandelbrot
who found truth in the blood and air.
Euclid looked on beauty stark and bare,
Mandelbrot appraised her everywhere.

✪ DIANA DER-HOVANESSIAN is the author of two books of poetry, *How to Choose Your Past*, and *About Time*.
†*Fractals* is a geometry invented in 1975 by Benoit Mandelbrot to find order in chaotic shapes and processes.



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# On Not Understanding Michel Foucault

JOHN WEIGHTMAN

THERE USED TO BE A SAYING: *Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français,* and by and large it was true, at least as far as prose literature and academic writing were concerned. Some texts might demand very close attention, but it was rare for a French thinker to allow himself illogicalities or obscurities in the presentation of his ideas; the reader didn't usually have to ask himself what these ideas were, but only whether, after having understood them, he could agree with them or not.

This tradition continued, let us say, up to the time of Sartre and Camus, who might occasionally be difficult but were never deliberately arcane. However, the foremost *maîtres à penser* of the next two or three decades—Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—brought about a complete change of atmosphere that quickly communicated itself to their numerous disciples. In some areas of speculation, traditional French clarity disappeared, to be replaced, in varying degrees, by obliqueness, preciosity, and hermeticism, as if these were, by definition, more valid modes of operation than lucid, rational statement. There are now signs, after about a quarter of a century of obnubilation, that the phenomenon may have passed its peak, but certainly, until quite recently, it was possible to say: *Ce qui n'est pas un peu obscur n'est plus vraiment parisien.*

It is not my purpose here to investigate the possible reasons for this outbreak of distinguished, secular glossolalia. Fashions, whether in clothes or intellectual attitudes, are notoriously difficult to explain, and although this one shows obvious traces of the combined influences of German thought (particularly the rhetorical philosophy of Nietzsche), Mallarmé's poetic doctrines, the Surrealist cult of the illogical, and the Freudian promotion of the unconscious, I am not sure how these various elements, or other contributory causes, came together to produce the

✪ JOHN WEIGHTMAN, professor emeritus of French at London University, is the author of *The Concept of the Avant-Garde.*



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trend. I merely wish to emphasize the problems it has raised for a veteran Francophile by commenting on one of the typical books of the period that I have labored over for some time, without making much headway.

This book is *Les Mots et les choses* by the late Michel Foucault, a writer who has acquired a considerable reputation in France and abroad. A man of great mental energy and verbal fluency, he dealt with a wide range of sociological themes, from the treatment of madness to the distribution of power in society, at the same time as he was an active participant in certain "progressive" causes. *Les Mots et les choses*, which appeared in 1966, is generally referred to as his masterpiece, and it launched two or three key terms that have been current ever since. I have read Foucault's other books, insofar as I am capable of doing so, but I prefer to concentrate on this one, since it remains a central and still fashionable text. I am aware, of course, that my difficulty in understanding may arise from my own inadequacy, but, if so, the reader will quickly realize this, and no harm will have been done. My excuse for expounding my perplexities is the strong suspicion that we are dealing here with a pernicious form of writing, radically different in kind from normal academic discourse, even though it is the work of a professor who eventually held a chair at the Collège de France.

From the start, *Les Mots et les choses* is not an easy book to get into focus, because Foucault, instead of announcing his intentions clearly, sidles into his subject by way of modish and rather puzzling references to Jorge Luis Borgès, the Surrealists, and Raymond Roussel (a marginal writer, whom Foucault elevates—without explanation in this context—to magisterial status). However, it transpires in due course that he is about to deal with the venerable problem of language and perception, as his title implies.

Let us start from the premise that the given world is formless, until man sorts it out into categories of objects and relationships by means of language. Is Foucault going to elaborate on the Kantian view that man, of necessity, perceives the world according to the possibilities of his sense organs, which determine the limits of his perceptions and therefore of his speech (a view, incidentally, that had been prefigured, on the French side, by Montesquieu, when he said, with typical eighteenth-century French wit, that if triangles had a God, He would be three-sided)? Or the Whorfian tenet that different types of language—for example, the American-Indian and the European—embody radically different approaches to reality? Or the Chomskian hypothesis that, beneath the superficial variety of languages, there are deep structures of universal validity? None of these interest him, as it happens; his concern



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is with the way in which language and perception have shifted historically in France, and more generally in Europe, during the last five hundred years.

Here we might suppose ourselves to be on familiar ground. With the passage of time, any given culture recrystallizes in various forms: the Age of Louis XIV was very different from the Third Republic, Victorian England was quite remote from the Swinging Sixties, and the peculiarities of any such strongly marked historical periods are enshrined in the linguistic expression they evolved for themselves. However, Foucault's thesis is much more radical and original than that. He declares dogmatically toward the end of his preface that behind the surface culture and overt language of any period is a hidden mode of perception that is governing them. It is *un ordre muet*, a silent order, or a *grille seconde*, a secondary grid, to which he gives the name *épistémè*, or epistomological field. This is the ground base, *le socle positif*, or positive foundation, to which all the multifarious outward manifestations are related.

Curiously enough, he offers no explanation of the way in which these *épistémès* come into being, nor of the reasons for their modification. Moreover, he posits only three, or perhaps four, of them during the last five centuries: that of the Renaissance, that of *l'âge classique* (a period that appears to stretch from the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth, or the beginning of the nineteenth), and that of "modernity," although he sometimes implies that we have now gone beyond that stage into post-modernity. The uncovering and investigation of these *épistémès* does not belong to "history of ideas," because that discipline deals only with openly articulated opinions or concepts. Foucault considers his undertaking to be more properly named "archaeology"; hence the subtitle of the volume: *une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Foucault proposes to show how *les sciences humaines* have been conditioned in their evolution by the shifts in the *épistémès* governing the relationship between language and things.

An initial problem, from the English point of view, is that he never states specifically which subjects he is thinking of under the heading of *sciences humaines*. In English, we normally distinguish between science proper, which is experimental science, and those disciplines, sometimes abusively called "social sciences," such as history, politics, psychology, etc., by means of which man tries to define his own mental and social functioning. These are non-scientific, or only scientific in certain of their aspects. Foucault appears to have no such clear distinction in mind and, as we shall see later, he runs together three disparate disciplines—linguistics, biology, and economics—with confusing consequences.

Foucault's book is, then, essentially a reassessment of the intellectual



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changes that occurred in France—and possibly in Europe, although the extent to which he believes the *épistémès* to be European remains tantalizingly vague—between the Renaissance and modern times. This is a well-worn theme, on which there is a generally received view, unconnected with any theorizing about *épistémès*. If we disregard for the moment the tangle of conflicting opinions about particular issues, this view goes somewhat as follows.

Scientific inquiry and freedom of thought, which had been no more than embryonic during the Middle Ages, developed in rapid spurts in Europe after the Revival of Learning and during the Reformation. However, in seventeenth-century France, the strongly Counter-Reformation atmosphere established under the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV entailed a clampdown on all dissident religious, or non-religious, opinion. Free thought, then called *le libertinage*, went underground. But an interesting paradox about *le grand siècle*, as the age of Louis XIV came to be called, was that it produced a great literature in a climate of intellectual repression, thus demonstrating that art can flourish under certain kinds, at least, of restriction.

The official doctrine of the seventeenth century was Catholic orthodoxy (Gallican as opposed to Ultramontane). It was still at that time anti-scientific and providentialist, as well as static and non-evolutionary. Historical change was seen as occurring through the operation of God's will, whether mysterious or manifest; the King ruled by Divine Right and was the father of his people, as God was the father of creation. The desire for knowledge was denounced as the *libido sciendi*, the satanic temptation, and this world was considered as a repetitive preparation for the next. Within this framework, there were, of course, incidental technical developments and significant, though largely unremarked, social changes, which however did not appreciably modify the overall pattern.

The great intellectual drama of the two or three generations during the decline, and following the death, of Louis XIV was the emergence of free thought into the full light of day—the Enlightenment, in fact. Religious orthodoxy and the fundamentalist acceptance of the Bible were queried; social institutions were criticized as being provisional, and perhaps faulty, human arrangements; history was invented as an attempt to understand the operation of human affairs on their own level, since God's will was so difficult to interpret; science forged ahead and began to adumbrate the first intimations of evolutionary theory. In short, during the overlapping lifetimes of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau—to mention only the most famous thinkers, all of whom died well before the Revolution—the modern world was born.

This enormous commonplace may sometimes be overlooked, be-



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cause of the more recent excitements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the fact is that most of the fundamental issues of our time, and especially the tension between the religious and the secular worldviews, were formulated more or less clearly by the French Enlightenment. Some people now seem to imagine that God was killed dramatically by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century; in the eighteenth, He had already been abandoned as a usable idea by Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot, and if Rousseau still held on to Him, this was largely as a reflection of his own ego.

Since Foucault himself belongs to the secular camp, and therefore, in some sense at least, must be an heir to the Enlightenment, one would have expected him to accept this pattern. Instead, he completely subverts it by assuming that no major intellectual watershed occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. The expression *l'âge classique*, which he had already used in a previous volume, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, as if its meaning were self-evident, is a dubious neologism of his own invention. It rests on the hypothesis that the underlying *épistémè*—"the classical *épistémè* of representation," as he calls it—remained unchanged from the mid-seventeenth century until after the Revolution of 1789, and rendered all the surface phenomena relatively insignificant. Most people would agree, I think, that the expression, *l'âge classique*, could conceivably be applied to the literary flowering of *le grand siècle*, which remains the "classic" period of French neo-classical literature, but that would be the limit of its relevance. It is true that neo-classicism remained the official aesthetic doctrine of the Ancien Régime right to the end, just as the political system survived, apparently intact, while crumbling from within. But, inside this static framework, there occurred the major intellectual revolution that has been abundantly described by historians of ideas, as well as interesting artistic innovations and striking changes in collective sensibility. To run all this together under the heading of *l'âge classique* is very arbitrary, unless the "*épistémè* of representation" turns out to be something of overwhelming importance that no one had noticed before.

Foucault refers briefly, on more than one occasion, to the conventional view, but only to dismiss it as negligible. After mentioning some of the scientific controversies of the eighteenth century, he goes on:

> Through these problems and the discourse they engender, it is child's play for historians to reconstitute the great debates that, it is said, divided public opinion and the passions and reasoning powers of men. Thus, they believe they can retrace a major conflict between a theology that places God's providence, the simplicity, the mystery, and the solicitude of his divine ways behind all forms and movements, and a science that is already seeking to define the autonomy of nature.



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It will be noticed that he doesn't argue against the generally accepted view; he merely implies that it is wrong by the use of the supercilious phrases: "it is child's play for historians to reconstitute the great debates" *(c'est un jeu pour les historiens . . . dont il est dit que . . . on croit retrouver).* Earlier, after alluding to *"les grands débats qui ont occupé l'opinion,"* he had been slightly more explicit:

> It is quite possible to write a history of thought in the classical age, taking these debates as a starting point or as themes. But the result will be no more than a history of opinions—that is, of the choices made respectively by individuals, milieus, or social groups; and this implies a whole method of inquiry. But if we wish to undertake an archaeological analysis of knowledge itself, these celebrated debates cannot serve as a guiding line or structure the argument. It is necessary to reconstitute the system of thought, whose pattern, in its positivity, allows a range of simultaneous and apparently contradictory opinions. It is this pattern which defines the conditions necessary for the possibility of such and such a debate or problem, and which underlies the historicity of knowledge.

Is Foucault suggesting, by the expression *opinions apparemment contradictoires*, that if Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, etc., had understood the *épistémè* according to which they were functioning, they would have realized that their disapproval of the prejudices and injustices that they criticized so boldly was only a surface ripple, which did not distinguish them essentially from the contemporary holders of opposite opinions, who were prepared to send them to jail and ban their books?

Strangely enough, this is precisely what he is suggesting, because he makes it clear, in another context, that the Enlightenment and the tradition that emerged from it are, in his opinion, no more than a superficial phenomenon:

> In vain do we have the impression of an almost uninterrupted development of the European *ratio* from the Renaissance to the present day . . . all this quasi-continuity at the level of ideas and themes is doubtless only a surface effect.

Since Foucault proposes to replace the ordinary history of ideas by an original analysis based on *épistémès* that are to be discovered by "archaeological" inquiry, we have to ask: what is the status of "archaeology," as he defines it, and what proof does he offer for the existence of the *épistémès*?

We immediately come up against a methodological problem. If, as he declared at the outset, the order of the *épistémè* was, or is, *muet* (silent or unspoken) in each of the three or four periods, how can its nature be divined? The *épistémès* of the past must have disappeared without leaving any direct trace, because, if they did not rise to the surface of any



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individual consciousness, no one could voice them. The *épistémè* of the present must be similarly inaccessible to direct examination; to attempt to define it must be like trying to jump away from one's shadow. Granting, for the sake of argument, that the *épistémès* actually existed, their nature can only be inferred by means of extrapolatory guesswork based on such documentary evidence as is available, according to normal historical procedures. By likening himself to an archaeologist, Foucault is implying that he is able to interrogate some mute object, as the archaeologist does, for instance, when he digs up an uninscribed pot and tries to set it in its cultural context with the help of his knowledge and imagination. Foucault, however, like any historian, is re-interpreting what has already been formulated in language. It is true that he tends to forage in the byways of history to unearth lesser-known texts, while often ignoring major texts to which other people would pay attention, but this does not make him any more of an "archaeologist."

When, for instance, in chapter 2, he goes on to explain the *épistémè* of the Renaissance, which is based, he tells us, on the principle of "*la ressemblance*," he quotes at length from Paracelsus and other neo-medieval authors outside the scientific line of descent, to show that they saw the world as a complex system of correspondences between heaven and earth, plants and animals, etc. In summarizing their attitudes, he is reporting their words, since they are quite explicit about their pre-scientific assumptions. Surely, then, "archaeology" is no more than an inaccurate metaphor that serves to give a false air of novelty or concreteness to Foucault's highly idiosyncratic practice of history. Yet he goes on using the terms *archaeology* and *archaeological* as if they had a genuine meaning, and a surprising number of commentators have followed suit. (In 1969, he published a whole volume, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, that is meant as a theoretical elaboration of the concept and that juggles at length with two new key terms, *le discours* and *l'énoncé*. I can only say that it still leaves me unconvinced.)

*Épistémè* is just as problematic a term. Foucault doesn't say how he evolved the concept; more unexpectedly, he doesn't expound the nature of the different *épistémès* in chronological sequence. After the preface, it would have been logical for chapter 1 to deal with the Renaissance *épistémè* of resemblance, the first in the series. Instead, the reader is plunged without warning into a brilliant description of a famous picture, *Las Meninas* (The Maidservants) by Velasquez, which seems at first sight to have nothing at all to do with the subject under discussion. Oddly enough, it was this description, perhaps more than anything else, that first helped to make the book famous. Only on the very last page of the chapter is it revealed that the picture is to be taken as an expression of the "*épistémè* of representation" of *l'âge classique*:



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Perhaps, in this picture by Velasquez, there is, as it were, the representation of classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up. It undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the gazes to which it offers itself, the faces it makes visible, and the gestures that bring it into being. But here, in this dispersal that it draws together and spreads out at one and the same time, an essential void is imperiously indicated from all directions: the necessary disappearance of that which establishes it—of him whom it resembles and of him in whose eyes it is no more than resemblance. This very subject—which is one and the same—has been elided. And freed at last from the relationship that held it prisoner, representation can offer itself as pure representation.

These precious, mannered sentences are not easily comprehensible in themselves, nor do they make the relevance of *Las Meninas* immediately clear. There had been no previous mention of the relationship of the fine arts to the *épistémè*, nor are we told whether the picture itself is an example of the operation of the classical *épistémè* in Spain, or just a convenient metaphorical device that Foucault has hit upon to demonstrate his point. Since the canvas dates from 1656, it only just scrapes into the time span of the classical *épistémè* that he has already indicated, so it is probably meant simply as an illustration. But what exactly is it illustrating?

The most striking feature of the Velasquez masterpiece is that the scene it represents—the painter himself, working on a large canvas with only the back of it visible, in the presence of the Infanta Margarita and her attendants, most of whom are looking outward from the picture—is viewed from the position of the invisible subject being painted by the artist. A reflection in a mirror within the picture reveals this subject to be the Infanta's parents, Philip IV and his Queen. If we imagine the King standing in front of the scene, he was *object* for the painter, but *subject* with regard to the scene itself, which his gaze was registering, or organizing, in its intricate perspective. If Foucault's comment means that all the directional lines of the picture refer back to the central, external point occupied by the King (or any other spectator), the fact is obvious. The picture is, in the first place, a highly ingenious exploitation of the principles of perspective discovered by the optical science of the Renaissance. What puzzles me is that Foucault should assert *la disparition nécessaire de ce qui la fonde*, the necessary disappearance of the perceiving subject. He seems to be forgetting for the moment that the real perceiving subject is Velasquez, not the King, who was probably not present at all. The painter no doubt set up the scene with the easel, the Infanta, and her attendants in the usual way—the canvas is essentially a portrait of the Infanta, a brilliant presentation of her, as it were, to her invisible or absent parents—and added his own likeness and the royal



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reflections later. The subject is only elided in the sense that Velasquez is *pretending* not to be there, while lending his vision to the imagined presence of the King. The picture is not an example of pure, independent representation, if indeed there can be any such thing. It is a vigorous expression of the subjectivity of the painter; as art critics have pointed out, the brushwork is very personal, even impressionistic, at the same time as the picture respects the impersonal principles of perspective. Foucault seems to be straining the meaning of the picture unduly to make it express some general point about language and perception, but again his drift is not clear.

I can only guess at his intentions by working backwards to the *épistémè* of representation from what he next goes on to say, in chapter 2, about the Renaissance *épistémè* of resemblance.

He expatiates at length on the fact that many Renaissance writers, while seeing correspondences between the earth and the heavens, animals and plants, the animate and the inanimate, etc., also thought of language as a concrete entity "inscribed in the world." This was presumably a remnant of the archaic concept of a perfect, pre-Babelian language that did not translate reality but was identical with it. In the Golden Age, let us say, there had been perfect coincidence between words and things, and the Renaissance—or part of it—still clung to this notion. Foucault himself is obviously attracted to it because, far from treating it as an outmoded belief, he declares that, in the classical age, "*les choses et les mots vont se séparer,*" thus accepting the postulate that they had once been united, which is contrary to any rational view of language. In so doing, he is implying, I think, that the writers of the eighteenth century, unlike some of their Renaissance predecessors, used language instrumentally, as if it were a transparent, non-distorting—or potentially non-distorting—vehicle of expression, a direct translation or extension of human reason, and that this was too facile or too superficial an approach.

It is true that, by and large, the Enlightenment had this attitude, and used rational language to query what it considered as irrational uses of language—such indeed was its essential feature—but it would be wrong to suppose that Montesquieu, Voltaire, or Diderot were naïvely unaware of the ambiguities and uncertainties of language, even in its rational uses. Besides, the attempt to use language rationally had been in progress intermittently since ancient Greece, and was characteristic of some of the more notable figures of the Renaissance. When Foucault is asserting the existence of the *épistémè* of resemblance, he amply illustrates the pseudo-rationale behind the theorizing of Paracelsus and others like him, but, without a word of explanation, he completely disregards the precursors of the modern worldview, such as Galileo,



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Leonardo, and Montaigne, who must have been out of step with the supposed *épistémè* of their day.

Foucault seems to be in a muddle here. On the one hand, he appears to dislike the transparent, rational language of the eighteenth century, which he describes as resting on a binary relationship between sign and signification. It is too thin for him, too far removed from the concept of the incarnate Word embedded in creation. He almost seems to want to experience a thrill of pantheistic transcendentalism through the mystery of language, even though he has rejected the idea of God. On the other hand, he admits, at least on one occasion, *"le caractère . . . absolument pauvre"* of *le savoir* of the sixteenth century, as if recognizing that the *épistémè* of resemblance could not lead to true scientific knowledge.

The root of the matter, perhaps, is that, for some reason, he was loath to accept fully the scientific worldview—that is, the piecemeal development of the European *ratio* that he refers to so contemptuously. The ambiguity of his attitude is shown in a significant passage where he postulates a kind of intellectual equivalence between Buffon, the eighteenth-century naturalist with a genuinely scientific approach, and Aldrovandi, an earlier naturalist, whom Buffon accused of mixing up fact and fiction:

> Aldrovandi was neither a better nor a worse observer than Buffon; he was no more credulous than he, nor less insistent on fidelity to what he saw or on the rationality of things. Simply, his gaze was not linked to things by the same system, or by the same arrangement of the *épistémè*. Aldrovandi, for his part, was meticulously contemplating a nature that, from top to bottom, was inscribed with writing.

The last sentence refers to the fact that the pre-scientific naturalists of the Renaissance looked upon the "resemblances" among phenomena as a mysterious record of God's message "inscribed" in things and saw it as their function to "read" or interpret that message, a process that involved intuition, like science proper, but, unlike science, did not include verifying the intuition. It was essentially an act of faith, and Foucault, by his use of the word *simplement* (simply), is denying the vital distinction between the circular processes of pre-scientific, God-based thinking and open-ended, cumulative inquiry, which is science as understood by Buffon.

There is a similar leaning towards mysticism in his repeated suggestion that the *épistémè* of representation is inferior in its effects both to the Renaissance view of language as being "inscribed" in the world and to the working of the modern, post-Enlightenment *épistémè*, which—or so he maintains—has given rise to a form of writing so pregnant with meaning that Foucault wishes to restrict the term *littérature* solely to its



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designation, thus leaving outside the category of literature, it must be said, the bulk of modern writing. His procedure is characteristically oracular.

He develops at length the proposition that the Enlightenment, using its binary linguistic system in a combination of *mathesis, taxinomie,* and *analyse génétique,* set out to tabulate the whole of the given in an orderly manner. A noble ambition, one might have thought, but Foucault does not appear to consider it so, because he wants language to do more than simply "represent." He complains that, during the classical age, language becomes so transparent in its representative function that it is elided, just as the subject was supposed to be elided in the Velasquez picture. Once more he expresses himself in sibylline fashion, but it is clear that he looks upon this "elision" as a weakness:

> . . . to represent does not mean here to translate, to give a visible version, to create a material counterpart that, on the external flank of the body, can reproduce thought in its exactness. To represent is to be understood in the strict sense: language represents thought, as thought represents itself. To constitute language, or to animate it from within, there is no essential act of signification, but only, at the heart of representation itself, the power it possesses to give a representation of itself—that is, to analyze itself by juxtaposing itself, part by part, under the gaze of reflection, and to delegate itself in a substitute that prolongs it.

I cannot understand either "to create a material counterpart that, on the external flank of the body, can reproduce thought in its exactness" or "an essential act of signification" that animates language from within. Both statements seem to relate again to the archaic belief in a possible concrete coincidence between reality and words, whereas it seems obvious to me that every use of language *is* a translation, in the sense that it is a necessarily reductive, symbolic representation of a portion of the infinite possibilities of the given. (It is perhaps worth noting that, in the paragraph quoted, Foucault seems to be using *traduire* [to translate] with the peculiar meaning of "to carry over entire or unchanged," whereas the normal sense is "to convert to a different symbolic system.") Reductionism is of the essence of language; the difference between good and bad linguistic expression is the difference between pithy, accurate reduction and wooly, flaccid reduction. Nor is there any "essential act of signification"; words only mean what they have come to mean in the historical context in which they are used, and that meaning, more often than not, has a fringe of ambiguity because of the frequent semantic shifts that have occurred in the hurly-burly of use. Furthermore, to suggest that language is "elided" in the best writing of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau makes no critical sense at all, because



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each of them, in his different way, displays linguistic genius; the style of each has a poetic force dependent on the distinctive personal way in which language is being used.

Foucault certainly behaves as if he thought the language of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries inferior, because he praises certain post-Enlightenment writers—in one context, he may instance Mallarmé, Hölderlin, and Antonin Artaud, in another Nietzsche, Raymond Roussel, and Georges Bataille—for having endeavored to get back to what he calls *l'être vif du langage*. They have tried to create "a counter-discourse . . . by thus working back from the representative or signifying function of language to its fundamental being, forgotten since the sixteenth century." In these writers, "the being of language shines again at the limits of Western culture. . . . From the nineteenth century onwards, literature brings language up to date [or, brings language to light again?] by replacing it in its being." All of these expressions with *être* again imply that there is, or was, a superior, inherent Being of language, comparable to the mythic coincidence of language and things that existed before the catastrophe of Babel. The biblical Babel can be considered as the Second (linguistic) Fall of Man; Foucault is postulating another, latter-day Fall at the time of the Enlightenment; man fell into rationalism and scientific inquiry, thus losing the poetic wholeness of language.

I would not dismiss this as absolute nonsense. There is a problem of which Mallarmé, Valéry, and Bachelard, for instance, were well aware. How can one think of the world scientifically and poetically at the same time? How can one reconcile the archaic, animal sense-equipment of man, by which he lives from day to day, with the impersonal, inhuman world discovered by his intellect? The post-Enlightenment tradition entails a constant threat of schizophrenia. Indeed, the threat was already present at the time of the Enlightenment, since it was consciously articulated in Diderot's correspondence and embodied in the tensions of Rousseau's *Confessions*. If this is what Foucault is getting at, I appreciate the point, but I think he is confusing, rather than helping, matters by harking back to an obscurantist view of language, by trying to put the Enlightenment out of court, as it were, with the help of a dubious pattern of *épistémès*, and by restricting the term *littérature* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the works of a very short list of writers, at least four of whom collapsed into pathological insanity, not necessarily related to the schizophrenic strain mentioned above.

There are further difficulties connected with the concept of the *épistémè*. Foucault declares categorically: "In a culture, at any given moment, there can be only one *épistémè* that defines the possibilities of knowledge." How can he be so sure? Given that each newborn child is



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a cultural barbarian with as yet unrevealed potentialities, it is a safe bet that all possible ways of perceiving the world coexist at any one time, at least in the form of embryos that may, or may not, develop. The fact that a particular worldview is dominant in a given society at a given moment does not mean that others are absent; any one of them may be waiting in the wings to take over. It is a commonplace that there were freethinkers in the age of faith, just as there are fundamentalists, and perhaps even flat-earthers, in the present age of science. It is another commonplace that radically different ways of perceiving the world may be at war with each other in one and the same mind. If society did not consist of such a fluctuating turmoil of attitudes, how could cultural change ever occur? Foucault presents his sequence of three or four *épistémès* as if they were absolutes that, for reasons unknown, suddenly replaced each other. For this to be so, the conditions governing the inception of each one would have to be present objectively in the external world, like meteorological phenomena or cosmic rays. But culture exists only in transient, individual human minds, subject to the crosscurrents of social interplay, and consequently does not admit of absolutes, or even of tidy definitions. In the scientific field, the history of evolving ideas can be written with a degree of certainty, since there is a growing body of generally accepted conclusions, testable against the impersonal world and therefore, in a sense, independent of the temperamental differences between individuals. In all other areas of culture, conclusions are, by definition, intellectually provisional, even though, for moral reasons, they may often have to be acted upon as if they were quasi-certainties.

Foucault's determination to cling to his absolute *épistémès* makes his argument particularly contorted, when he tries to demonstrate that the European intellectual watershed occurred, not during the Enlightenment, but some twenty-five or more years later, when, he says, the *épistémè* of representation gave way to the modern *épistémè*. To do this, he selects three particular areas—language study, natural history, and economics—and argues that they underwent a fundamental change at some point between the end of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth. His thesis, briefly summarized, is that analytical grammar was replaced by the historical discipline of philology; natural history as a taxonomy based on a comparison of external features turned into biology concerned with the inner principle of life; and economics, after originally depending on the concept of wealth, took as its central theme the principle of production.

At first sight, he seems to be saying that the essential difference between the eighteenth-century *épistémè* and the nineteenth-century or modern one, was a shift from the static to the dynamic, or from an



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unchanging representationalism to a form of vitalism. The synchronic analysis of grammatical structure gave way to the diachronic plotting of the history of language-families; the forms of plants and animals, instead of being looked upon as permanent features amenable to settled classification, were seen as provisional arrangements resulting from the tensions between life and the possibilities of the environment; the ideal of economic prosperity was envisaged, not as a state, but as the continuing result of a process.

If we subsume these new developments under the heading of evolutionism, Foucault is suggesting that the eighteenth century had no real grasp of the concept. How can he maintain this when the whole drive of the Enlightenment depended on a belief in the possibility of overall change, which the less sophisticated writers expressed as a naïve confidence in Progress? Admittedly, the intimations of the scientific theory of evolution present, for instance, in Diderot's work, were only a dim foreshadowing of Darwin's hypothesis, but social evolutionism was fully fledged as an idea before the Revolution of 1789. Why Foucault should wish to discount this major truth remains a mystery unless, like Sartre, he has difficulty in being fair to the men of the Enlightenment because, with misplaced passion, he holds them responsible for the fact that the Revolution, instead of producing Utopia, eventually resulted in the bourgeois society of nineteenth-century France.

And why, in order to prove his point, should he make such an odd and arbitrary choice of disciplines, as if all three were on the same level, and representative of the whole field of knowledge? There is a difference in kind between biology, a hard science in its essential features, and language study and economics, which so far have been able to apply strictly scientific procedures only in certain limited areas of their activity. In the case of language study, for instance, phonetics can be largely, although not entirely, reduced to scientific principles, but other major issues, such as the origins of language, its immediate functioning in the mind, the reasons for linguistic change, etc., are still beyond scientific definition. Foucault talks at some length about nineteenth-century philology, as if it were radically different from the eighteenth-century way of looking at things. I would say rather that it was an elaborate description of the external features of language, very comparable to the taxonomy that he declares to be the dominant characteristic of eighteenth-century natural history. The same philological development might have occurred in the eighteenth century, had the significance of Sanskrit been discovered two or three generations earlier.

Most of the passages in which Foucault tries to establish an equivalence between his three chosen disciplines through their asserted relationship to the supposed *épistémè* remain opaque for me through my



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inability to follow abstract thought unsupported by concrete examples, especially when it develops in rhetorical whorls rather than logical sequences, and makes great use of such spongy metaphors as *épaisseur*, *pliure*, and *murmure*. Occasionally, when an illustration is supplied, I think I have a glimmering of understanding, but it brings me no nearer to agreement. For instance, Foucault draws a parallel between the concept of value in eighteenth-century economics and what he calls "*l'essence du langage*" in eighteenth-century language study. In both cases, he states, there are alternative ways of looking at things, and they are in correspondence as between disciplines. What he says about economics may well be correct; at least it seems intelligible to the layman; but his remarks on language show all the signs of special pleading:

> Hence two possible and simultaneous readings: one analyzes value in the very act of exchange, at the point of intersection of what is given and what is received; the other analyzes it as prior to the exchange and as the primary condition for its taking place. These two readings correspond the first to an analysis that places and encloses the entire essence of language on the side of primitive designations—the language of action or the root; in the first case, language finds its area of possibility in an attribution ensured by the verb—i.e., by that element of language that stands back from all words but relates them to each other; the verb, which makes all the words of language possible from the starting point of their linkage in the sentence, corresponds to that exchange that establishes the value of the things exchanged and the price they fetch as an act more primitive than others. In the other form of analysis, language is rooted outside itself, in nature as it were, or in the analogies between things; the root, the first cry that gave birth to words before language itself was born, corresponds to the immediate establishment of value before the exchange and the reciprocal operations of need.

In this passage, as elsewhere in the book, it is not always clear, because of Foucault's fuzziness of presentation, whether he is summarizing the opinions of others—in this case, of eighteenth-century theorists, to whom by definition he must be opposed—or momentarily forgetting about them and expressing his own thoughts. In either case, it is difficult to see what is meant by "*le verbe . . . cet élément du langage en retrait de tous les mots mais qui les rapporte les uns aux autres*" (the verb . . . the element of language that stands back from all words but relates them to each other); the verb is itself a word among words, and it is not alone in having a binding function in the sentence; such a statement throws no light on the mystery of grammar. Similarly, the self-contradictory expressions "*le langage est enraciné hors de lui-même*" (language is rooted outside itself) and "*le premier cri qui donnait naissance aux mots avant même que le langage soit né*" (the first cry that gave birth to words before



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language itself was born) are just unhelpful rhetorical allusions to the conundrum of the origins of language. Whether they represent a fair summary of eighteenth-century views or are formulas thought up by Foucault himself, they seem inadequate to confirm a correspondence with economic theory.

Whatever Foucault's denials, there *has* been a gradual development of the European *ratio* over the last five centuries, and it has proceeded differently in different areas, according to the accidents of history. Reduced to its most schematic form, Foucault's concept of the *épistémè* means that when the epistemic basis suddenly changes (for reasons, I repeat, that he doesn't attempt to explain), there is a simultaneous change of step in all disciplines. It is as if he had in mind some mechanical, structuralist model that altered its overall shape, completely and symmetrically, when some vital part was moved. Such a model seems totally inappropriate to the haphazard development of knowledge, which dawdles in some quarters while rushing ahead in others, according to the aleatory play of circumstance.

Foucault is so insistent on his absolute distinctions that at times he even goes so far as to assert that the way of thinking according to the "classical *épistémè* of representation" is now quite foreign to us. If this were so, how is it that the major texts of the eighteenth century, although obsolete in some of their details, still speak directly to us in their humanely speculative reasonableness, which sounds like the very language of civilization itself?

If, as he says, the *épistémès* are "mute" in relation to the minds that are supposedly conditioned by them, it stands to reason that the modern *épistémè* (or perhaps post-modern?), according to which we ourselves are presumably functioning, will be particularly difficult to grasp, and indeed it seems to elude definition in the latter, and most clotted, part of the book. Foucault never characterizes it by a single term, as he had done with the previous two. I have already suggested that it might be called "the *épistémè* of evolutionism," except that I would dispense with the term *épistémè* as being an imaginative complication. The evolutionary connection seems to be confirmed by his reference (page 356) to

> a redistribution of the *épistémè*: when, leaving the space of representation, living beings took their place in the specific profundity of life, wealth took its place in the progressive growth of the forms of production, and words theirs in the diachronicity of languages.

But, two pages later, *l'épistémè moderne* becomes *"un espace volumineux et ouvert selon trois dimensions"* (a voluminous, three-dimensional space); these dimensions are, rather bewilderingly: (1) *les sci-*



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*ences mathématiques et physiques* (the hard sciences?) (2) *les sciences du langage, de la vie, etc.* (a mixture of soft and hard sciences?), and (3) *la réflexion philosophique qui se développe comme pensée du Même* (judging from the general context, this dark phrase appears to be an acceptance of Nietzsche's vision of Eternal Recurrence, which could be reconciled with a pattern of repeating evolutionary cycles, but is in contradiction with open-ended evolutionism, which I take to be the modern scientific view).

Given these uncertainties, it is more practical, I think, to abandon the *épistémè moderne* altogether as a will-o'-the-wisp that even Foucault himself may have tired of pursuing, and to put the straightforward questions: What is he saying about the modern intellectual situation? Why has he tried to subvert the conventional view of the Enlightenment in order to make a comment on the social sciences?

It cannot have been simply to conclude, as he eventually does, that the social sciences are not yet strictly scientific. In so doing, he is breaking down an open door, because very few people would maintain that they are. I guess him to be mounting a much broader attack on positivism. He objects to the usual picture of the gradual development of the European *ratio*, because he sees it as leading in the direction of increasing positivism, and although he himself is a secular thinker and occasionally claims to be a positivist, he is not comfortable in this situation, although it is not clear why. However, the main point of his book turns out to be that man—*le fondement de toutes les positivités*—has become problematic. Man, he says, is a concept that did not exist before the nineteenth century and is now on the wane. Thus we arrive at the resounding formula: after the death of God, the death of Man. To explain to myself what this might mean, I have to go back again to the conventional historical view.

It is usually agreed that the Enlightenment inaugurated the modern attempt to define man in a secular perspective. The dominant philosophy of the eighteenth century was "humanism," as is emphasized by the prominence of the word *homme* in some famous contexts: *"L'homme est né libre. . . . Les Droits de l'homme . . . etc.* The nature of man was thought of as a subdivision of Nature in general and, in the first flush of optimism, it was supposed that society might be reformed to bring it into line with man's essential nature, which had somehow been obscured by the accretions of history. The task is, of course, more complex than it first appears, because the term *nature* is hopelessly ambiguous; in the broadest sense, it must, by definition, cover all human manifestations, because we cannot act outside our nature; it is undoubtedly part of man's nature to be "unnatural." However, in spite of this philosophical complication, we can say that the Enlightenment tried to put its trust



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in "man" and to re-establish him in a balanced, "natural" setting.

Foucault flatly contradicts this. He argues that, because of the prevailing *épistémè* of representation, there could be no true concept of "life" at that point and that "man," as an entity, was not invented until the nineteenth century. His assertion makes no sense to me, unless it means that the concept of man as an evolved animal was not fully realized before the nineteenth century. In many eighteenth-century minds, humanism, even when anti-religious, was still affected by the religious myth of a fall from grace; at some stage, primitive man had lived in harmony with nature; things had gone wrong, and he now needed to be rehabilitated as a "natural" being. This is a more sentimental and unrealistic view than the hypothesis that man is an evolved animal, who continues to be born an animal, but finds himself caught in a continuing, historically conditioned, cultural construct, to which he adapts, or which he attempts to modify, according to the promptings of his individual temperament. To put it crudely, there is a distinction between sentimental humanism that often unconsciously assumes that man is "good," and evolutionary humanism that accepts that morality is a provisional cultural tension that the human animal, man, imposes on his primary animal nature. However, I am not sure that this is Foucault's point, and in any case there were still many sentimental humanists in the nineteenth century, as indeed there are today. Conversely, some eighteenth-century humanists, such as Voltaire, were not sentimental in their deepest insights, even though scientific evolutionary theory was unknown to them.

I would say, then, that Foucault's first assertion—that man did not exist in the eighteenth century—is simply perverse. His next assertion—that man is a concept that is now disappearing, after having lasted for barely two centuries—is more interesting. It is a conceit, of course; as long as there are human beings, "man" in the ordinary sense will continue to exist. What Foucault is implying, I assume, is that man can no longer think of himself as a definable, natural being with any confidence or certainty. Following Sartre, he is casting doubt on the concept of human nature, but for different reasons.

Sartre, who placed his faith in the freedom of the individual, constantly maintained—despite the evidence to the contrary—that each of us is initially free to choose his destiny, and that our besetting sin is *mauvaise foi*—that is, a tendency to accept the existing prejudices of society too easily as objective truth. He challenged the concept of "human nature" as a harmful, conservative invention of bourgeois humanism. There is something of this in Foucault, particularly in those contexts where, like the early Sartre, he sees mental derangement as a noble and sympathetic reaction to the pressures of social conformism.



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But whereas Sartre, with his belief in free will, had to emphasize the autonomy of the subject (at least until it comes up against the collective roadblock of the *pratico-inerte)*, Foucault, in describing the modern intellectual situation, undermines the idea of the subject from several different angles. There is a contradiction here, because in dealing earlier with the *épistémè* of representation, he had presented the elision of the subject as a bad thing, to be corrected by the recovery of the "vital Being" of language. Also, he makes laudatory references to Nietzsche, whose concept of the Superman carried the belief in the subject to the point of megalomania. To complicate matters still further, in some late interviews he seems to revert to the opinion that all truth is subjective, or alternatively that there is no such thing as "truth," but only "power-knowledge" created by dominant subjectivities. Consistency was obviously not of vital concern to him, any more than clarity. Nevertheless, in the latter part of *Les Mots et les choses,* he develops his critique of the subject, and therefore of human nature or "man," from at least four interrelated points of view. In summarizing them, I have again to impose my own, no doubt limited, sense on a number of gnomic phrases.

He makes great play with the idea of man as *"un étrange doublet empirico-transcendantal."* This appears to mean that man exists as a material organism, but that his empirical grasp of his own material being and of its material context is achieved through the transcendental (that is, ultra-physical?) operation of his mind, which is not yet directly accessible to knowledge, and perhaps never will be. Paradoxically, our knowledge of the empirical rests, then, on the non-empirical or, more accurately, on the not-yet-reducible-to-the-empirical. Following on from this, Foucault expresses a need to *inquiéter tous les positivismes,* to query all forms of positivism, presumably as being too confident conclusions on the part of the subject.

Here again, Foucault's anti-scientific, anti-Enlightenment prejudice appears to be seeping through to blur the issue. Science originates in subjectivity—the individual mind of the researcher—but it aims at non-subjectivity; indeed, it is defined by its non-subjectiveness, which is agreed upon as between "transcendental" subjects, and its cumulative discoveries reinforce the collective idea of man as Homo sapiens. The administration of scientific discoveries, on the other hand, belongs not to science but to politics or sociology. Homo sapiens may destroy himself through the use of his inventions, but such an eventuality, if it occurs, will not invalidate scientific knowledge as such, retrospectively; it will rather confirm it. Science, as the central form of positivism, does not need to be "queried," because its own empirically tested self-criticism is its motive force. If Foucault is suggesting that the scientist is in a new and uncertain position in the modern world, he is surely wrong. The



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scientist's philosophical status has not changed, although he may be nearer than he once was to the formulation of ultimately irreducible contradictions in the human understanding of nature. Meanwhile, science proper, as subjective intuition tested rationally and objectively, has been a phenomenal intellectual success.

Foucault further stresses the limitations of the subject by arguing that all man's thought about himself takes place against the background of *l'impensé*, the un-thought or non-thought. He seems to be referring mainly to the Freudian theory of the unconscious, which opens up vistas of uncertainty about the possible coherence or unity of the human personality. His concern with this issue may explain his sympathetic prejudice in favor of unbalanced writers, such as Raymond Roussel and Antonin Artaud, whom he tends to speak of as if they had risked their sanity in the exploration of the *impensé*, or as if their insanity illuminated the so-called Being of language beyond the limits of reason. This attitude could be called romantic anti-rationalism rather than a serious critique of the operations of reason. (It is demonstrative of Foucault's anti-Enlightenment prejudice that, of all eighteenth-century writers, the only one he comments on at some length is the Marquis de Sade, but in particularly rhapsodic and elusive terms. A sober view of Sade would be that his derangement, insofar as it was not purely pathological, resulted from a one-sided conviction that, given the general inhumanity of Nature, the individual has the right, perhaps even the duty, to exploit his animal nature to the full, with the help of his human reason. Sade is perhaps an unusual case of a man driven mad by the idea of nature.)

Enlightenment rationalism, as practiced by Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot, was well aware of itself as a tiny, modest light broaching dark mysteries, and Freud, whether or not his hypotheses are deemed acceptable, thought of himself as pushing back the frontiers of unreason. Admittedly, the Socratic injunction "Know thyself," which is behind all Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought could, correspondingly, be characterized as romantic rationalism, because man, to know himself completely, would have to understand the universe, and it is inconceivable that the part should understand the whole. But, since ancient Greece, man, in his more lucid moments, has been engaged precisely on this paradoxical enterprise. As Valéry said: *"L'homme est absurde par ce qu'il cherche et grand par ce qu'il trouve,"* except that the adjective *grand* is perhaps too boastfully Promethean; man just is like that; he is defined by his attempt to reduce the unthought both inside and outside himself through the use of reason. But there are no grounds for concluding that this imperils his being as such; he undoubtedly exists, but always, as it were, in an unfinished state.

Foucault is more convincing when he makes use of history to



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question man as subject and human nature as a concept. In the modern world, he says, man is *déshistorisé*. This single word carries a double load of meaning. On the one hand, man knows little or nothing about the remote past, but enough to realize that the origins of society and language are no doubt irredeemably lost in the mists of time; we cannot be certain how anything began; we can only extrapolate backwards. On the other hand, the volume of recorded history is now so great as to be virtually unmanageable. I take Foucault to be saying that in a historically ignorant society—we could instance Louis XIV's France that lived its immediate, instinctive life according to largely unquestioned traditions, and saw the past through crystallized Graeco-Roman and Christian myth—there can be a fairly static concept of human nature, because the great differences between civilizations have not yet been generally grasped. In such a society, immediate reality is assumed to be universal, or at least all-important. But in the post-Enlightenment world, *la finitude de l'homme*, the finite nature of individual man, can be seen to have more drastic consequences. An increased knowledge of history shows that people have lived and died, enclosed within their contemporary attitudes, which may then become obsolete. For there to be such a thing as "human nature," we would have to find a pattern of common denominators between different periods and civilizations. Otherwise, man is "dehistorized" through having no coherent history to which he can refer as a guide to his being. As Foucault puts it:

> The positivistic knowledge of man is limited by the historical positivisity of the knowing subject, so that the finite moment is dissolved in the workings of a relativity from which there is no escape and which itself counts as an absolute.

In other words, I suppose, we are now so conscious of apparently incompatible cultural variations, both diachronically through time and synchronically across space, that it would take a bold man to say confidently with Terence: "*Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto.*" Christian humanism and Deistic religion get over the difficulty by postulating a God in whom all human contradictions are ineffably reconciled, even when incompatible individuals or groups have gone so far as to kill each other. The problem is canceled out by being transferred from the plane of reality to the unverifiable supernatural. Secular humanism, which is also a faith and, of necessity, a more strenuous one, has to suppose that man, by taking thought—that is, by using reason, his only self-illuminating and self-disciplinary device—will eventually evolve a moderately workable concept of human nature, valid for the whole globe. In this sense, the death of God entails, not the death of Man, but on the contrary his birth as a secular being, according to the



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original message of the Enlightenment. In the best authors, it was never a simplistic message, but always remained permeated with the tragic Absurdism that is also present in Christianity, where, however, it is given an easy resolution in pious myth. It is tragic Absurdism that is at the root of eighteenth-century wit and gives such poetic resonance, for instance, to Voltaire's masterpiece *Candide*, with its final, and still valid, injunction: "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*" A garden is never more than a slightly tamed jungle, always in danger of reversion, through the constantly reborn vagaries of human nature and the inexorable pressures of general nature.

If I have understood anything at all about Foucault, it is that he himself signally failed to understand the Absurdist evolutionary humanism, which is in the direct line of descent from the French Enlightenment. Instead, he ties himself and his reader in unnecessary theoretical knots with his "archaeology" and his "*épistémès*," and then displays a muddled enthusiasm for Nietzschean catastrophism, which posits, on the one hand, an impossible Superman, before Man himself has achieved anything like coherent being, and, on the other, a contradictory and gratuitous belief in Eternal Recurrence.

Finally, there is also an important germ of truth in what Foucault says about language in relation to the uncertainty of the subject, although he again develops the point negatively rather than positively, and apparently without noticing that it is not altogether in line with his previous statements about language being "inscribed" in the world.

We all tend to think that the language we speak "belongs" to us and allows us to express ourselves directly, because it wells up inside us, as if its being were coincidental with ours. But, of course, we were born without it, and have absorbed it from society since childhood. Perhaps the point can be made clear by saying that the potentiality to use language is an inborn human faculty, but that the particular language that we actually use is a prosthesis, historically conditioned and with its own pattern of possibilities and limitations, differentiating it from other languages, or foreign prostheses. Nor, in the act of using the prosthesis, do we know how it works, any more than we can follow our digestive processes while they are in operation. This is what Foucault is getting at, I imagine, in the following passage:

> How can man act as subject of language, when language has developed independently of him for thousands of years, when its system is beyond his ken, and its meaning sleeps an almost invincible sleep in the words that he causes to glitter for an instant by his discourse, and when, from the outset, he is obliged to lodge his speech and his thought within it, as if they could do no more than animate, for a brief moment, a segment of this web of countless possibilities?

This paranoiac formulation of the problem is followed by a despairing cry about the non-individuality of the speaking subject:



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Can I say, indeed, that I am this language that I speak, and into which my thought slips to find there all the possibilities peculiar to it, but which exists, however, only in the ponderous sedimentation that it will never be capable of actualizing to the full?

The rational answer to both questions might be that such declamatory complaints only serve to obscure the true nature of language and to encourage irresponsibility in its use. It is true that we can, in certain moods, look upon language as an elaborate fait accompli, even a prison house, from which the individual cannot escape, since he can only speak with the help of this collectively devised and pre-existent prosthesis. But as we must also recognize in other moods, language is the human invention *par excellence*, and the fundamental instrument of cultural freedom that gives the individual access, beyond his animal self, to other subjectivities, both alive and dead. The contradiction can be resolved by saying that we are all members of one another through language. The subject only exists insofar as he is able to reanimate the collective instrument, and adapt it to his own temperament, but in so doing he is using something far greater than himself, that should expand him rather than limit him.

However, in the uneasy balance between the individual and the collective, two opposite temptations can arise, to both of which, at different times, Foucault—along with some like-minded modernists—yields, I think, only too easily. One is to say that the subject does not exist, since he comes into being, or at least into communication, only through the activation of a collective medium. Thus we find strong personalities, including Foucault himself, sometimes pooh-poohing the idea that strong personalities exist; for instance, misled by Proust's own distinction between the everyday self and *le moi profond* that creates, they may go so far as to assert that *A la recherche du temps perdu* had no definable author; the apparatus of language set itself in motion, as it were, and wove the web of words that simple minds attribute to a supposed entity, Proust. The complementary exaggeration is to behave as if only the subject counted, and to handle language arbitrarily, creating neologisms and pseudo-concepts with complacent abandon, as if there were no responsibility to anyone but oneself, and perhaps not even to oneself, since there may be an insidious, oracle-like pleasure in thinking in riddles, or half-riddles, that one does not, oneself, fully understand, as if one were God speaking from a cloud.

It is not a question of frowning on linguistic play or sport, which is nine-tenths of the beauty of language, or of denying that it is better to half-understand a deep truth that feeds the mind just beyond the reach of reason, than to understand fully a more superficial truth that hasn't the same sustaining power. But there is an area of thought, especially of



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academic thought, where linguistic morality is paramount. Since all the operations of language are mysterious, even to the academic mind whose function is to respect the temperate, or tempering mystery of reason, the dividing line between pregnancy of meaning and pseudo-prophetic vacuity of meaning is a difficult one to tread. My chief complaint against Foucault is that, as a professor, he did not really try to tread it, either here in *Les Mots et les choses* or in his other copious writings, and so, regrettably, has to be classed as a *mauvais maître*.

# *Elegy Variations I*

RACHEL HADAS

Tears in themselves are not a test of love.
Call them the weeping, as a sore can weep,
of some fresh loss. They also signify
the precious rising sap of memory.
They water the green region of a smile.
They help to navigate the caves of ice
and float us through dim arches to a place
where pairs of mourners in the smoky air
lean towards each other as if their desire
were one enfolding for eternity.
No: the embrace
of shadow flesh is an embodiment
of truth we come to late as we approach
that shore, our sluggish senses
thickening even as they seem to stretch.
Mourners, but mourners who must stay in motion,
we tip out tears, libation in the dust,
a few dark drops for the road,
and turn to trace the paths of separation.

✪ RACHEL HADAS is the author of several books of poems, including *A Son from Sleep*. Her *Pass It On* is forthcoming this year from Princeton University Press.



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# Herodotus, Alexander, and Rome

G. W. BOWERSOCK

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, universally acknowledged as the Father of History in western civilization, is an author far easier to read than to talk about. In this respect, as in so many others, he is the antithesis of Thucydides, whom it is far easier to talk about than to read. The artfully simple style and the naive air of wonder that characterize Herodotus' presentation of his historical enquiries exude the charm of fairy tales and, in the same way, defy authoritative analysis. To the charm of his tales is added from time to time a poetic intensity that is all the more overwhelming because it takes the reader unawares. Herodotus passes from gold-digging ants to the destructive envy of the gods without a false note.

Historians have traditionally studied Herodotus for his detailed account of the great confrontation between the Persian invaders and the Greeks in the early fifth century B.C. For the momentous circumstances of Marathon and Salamis Herodotus was definitive in antiquity and remains so today. His compatriot of many centuries later, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, praised Herodotus for choosing as his theme a great triumph of the Greeks, and he faulted Thucydides for devoting his energies to the internecine disasters of the Peloponnesian War. But a century after Dionysius, Plutarch could just as easily take the opposite position, condemning Herodotus for being too sympathetic to the Persians and for disclosing Persian sympathies among some of the Greeks. But rather more than half of Herodotus' work is devoted to information of the most diverse kind about peoples and places inside and outside the Hellenic world, and it is here that the *innumerabiles fabulae*, "the innumerable tales" to which Cicero *(de Leg.* I.1.5) made reference, occur. The storytelling aspect of Herodotus has always been a problem and somehow made those who liked reading Herodotus feel slightly guilty. The work was simply not serious or weighty enough and seemed to touch on matters unworthy of a serious thinker, such as which sex stands up and which sits down while urinating. Herodotus found no grounds for excluding information as trivial, untruthful, or even absurd.

To Thucydides, who thought so hard that at times he could scarcely express himself, the Herodotean manner was more than unsympathetic, and to a greater or lesser extent we are all heirs of Thucydides in viewing with suspicion a work of history that is as at home with stories *(to muthôdes,* "the mythic") as it is with historical facts. The problem is inherent in Cicero's famous observation in the *de Legibus* in which he labels Herodotus for the first time as the Father of History *(pater historiae)* but says in the same breath that, like Theopompus, he wrote innumerable tales. Herodotus was, as Cicero says explicitly elsewhere *(de Div.* II.116), no more truthful than the poet Ennius. Although it is no small achievement for a writer to have an enduring reputation throughout the ages both as the Father of History and as a liar, it may be that this double judgment tells us more about Cicero and those who perpetuate his opinions than it does about Herodotus. Herodotus remains as elusive and as wonderful as he has ever been. No one, not even Cicero, could have doubted his genius, but it is hard to grasp. Herodotus is a kind of Mozart of historiography in compar-

✪ G. W. BOWERSOCK, professor of ancient history at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, is the author of, among other books, *Julian the Apostate, Roman Arabia,* and the forthcoming *Hellenism in Late Antiquity.*



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ison with the Beethoven of Thucydides. Paradoxically, the dark, brooding, stormy souls of our greatest creative artists are ultimately easier of access than those that radiate a perfect and childlike naivete. Herodotus' *History* is *The Magic Flute*, Thucydides' *History* is *Fidelio*.

In a seminal article of 1958, conveniently republished in *Studies in Historiography* (1966), Arnaldo Momigliano examined the place of Herodotus in the history of historiography. The article begins with a quotation of Cicero's notorious opinion and then goes on to generalize from it. In Momigliano's view, "No other writer was so severely criticized as Herodotus. His bad reputation in the ancient world is something exceptional that requires explanation." Somewhat later in the article, Plutarch's treatise *de Herodoti Malignitate* is brought into play and summarized, and the titles of one or two lost gems, such as Valerius Pollio's *On Herodotus' Thefts* or Harpocration's *On Herodotus' Lies*, are adduced for good measure. For his own part, Momigliano acknowledged that Herodotus had produced what he called "a very respectable history" mainly on the basis of sightseeing and oral tradition, but such meager praise as Momigliano can find in the ancient world for Herodotus' *History* is, in his analysis, largely owing to the style of the work. "From the first century B.C. to the late second century A.D.," wrote Momigliano, "Herodotus was in special favor as a model of style. Archaism operated in his favor." For Momigliano, it was not until the sixteenth century, when historians traveled in foreign countries, questioned local people, and collected oral traditions that Herodotus was appreciated as a historian. He even includes the discovery of America in the sixteenth-century reevaluation of Herodotus because some of his more incredible tales proved to be tame stuff by comparison with the reports of peoples and customs that reached Europe from the New World.

Momigliano's presupposition that Herodotus' reputation in antiquity was generally bad seems to me indefensible, but it is nevertheless an opinion that was already enshrined in 1913 in the long article on Herodotus in the second supplementary volume of the classical encyclopedia Pauly Wissowa from the pen of Felix Jacoby. Although no one could accuse Jacoby of not knowing the ancient sources since he diligently collected them all for the greater and lesser historians of Greek antiquity, here as elsewhere he seems to have been less careful in reflecting on the texts he collected than in simply collecting them. It was Jacoby's view that Herodotus became the special and priviledged property of the rhetorical schools and that such favor as he enjoyed was almost entirely in that benighted milieu. Jacoby was therefore moved to write that all the post-Hellenistic use and imitation of Herodotus was insignificant, *ohne grosse Bedeutung*.

Manifestly the view of Herodotus as a rhetorical vehicle underlies Momigliano's assessment. What is new in Momigliano's account is his emphasis on Herodotean sightseeing and oral tradition as providing the crucial explanation of the Herodotean enthusiasm that surged in the sixteenth century. On that point he is characteristically and undoubtedly right. But Herodotus was no Busbecq or Ibn Batuta, remarkable as such travelers were, since he undertook to compose a structured history. His work, though based in part on travel, is not a travelogue.

It has always seemed strange to me that Momigliano was so ready to believe that Herodotus' reputation was all that bad in antiquity, but I think one can understand his readiness to take over a position analogous to Jacoby's when one considers the polemic of the last decade that Momigliano directed against Hayden White's book on metahistory. What so particularly exercised Momigliano in White's theories was the notion that history ultimately could be no more than a rhetorical construct. When one takes into account the historian and the context in which he was writing, the categories of historical exposition emerge, in Hayden White's view, as essentially rhetorical. For Momigliano this was a wholly unacceptable repudiation of the historian's mission to establish facts and to publish only what is true.

In the traditional appreciations of Herodotus, Hayden White's theories come dangerously close to confirmation. When we consider Momigliano's view of the relation between rhetoric and history as it emerged in the last years of his life, it is scarcely surprising that several decades earlier he was prepared to believe that a historian who was supposed to have been the particular preserve of rhetoricians must automatically have had a



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bad reputation. But to show that this bad reputation was really not deserved, he was able to point to the aspects of travel and tradition that made Herodotus so appealing to historians after the Renaissance. But even if we can explain Momigliano's treatment of Herodotus' place in the history of post-Renaissance historiography in this way, we are no further along in dealing with the problem of Herodotus himself within the context of the ancient world.

The Father of History had critics, to be sure, as Thucydides did. His style was slavishly imitated by some inferior writers in subsequent centuries, as was the style of Thucydides as well. None of this proves much of anything. In fact, Herodotus was studied and admired in classical antiquity almost as much as Thucydides, and we may perhaps be able to understand better the greatness of Herodotus if we look at those periods in which his reputation was at its peak. Stylistic imitation can be a pointer to Herodotean enthusiasms, but, in the spirit of Momigliano's rejection of the inevitably rhetorical character of history, we must look above all to the substance. For Herodotus did far more than put together a respectable history on the basis of sightseeing and oral tradition. He created a history by region rather than chronology. He believed that myths and falsehoods were as worth putting on the record as palpable truths. The customs and habits of faraway peoples were as interesting to him as the martial exploits of the Greeks. In all of this he was utterly different from Thucydides. We are not talking about style but of substance and structure.

It is not, therefore, Herodotus' bad reputation in the ancient world that is something exceptional requiring explanation, according to Momigliano's formulation, but rather the periods in which his reputation soared. When and why was Herodotus particularly appreciated in antiquity—and appreciated for the substance and structure of his work, not merely his style? After all, the grammarians of the Hellenistic period, who fastened the names of the Muses onto the nine books of Herodotus' *History,* seem to have worked happily on his text without reflecting any larger interest at that time in his historiography. There are, in fact, three main periods of well-documented enthusiasm for Herodotus. The first, during his own lifetime, the second, during the lifetime of Alexander the Great, and the third, during the Roman Empire (especially in the second and third centuries A.D.).

Of Herodotus' reputation in his own day, little need be said. The sources, scattered and lacunose as they are, nonetheless leave us in no doubt of the popularity of the recitations that Herodotus provided of his *History,* especially in Athens. Nor should we be surprised that a work culminating in the Greek defeat of the invading armies of Persia should have appealed to Athenians in the first and second generations after that great triumph—Athenians who were constructing a far-flung and lucrative empire that brought them into direct contact with the Persians' own empire. Herodotus wrote in an age of imperialist expansion for an audience that had reason to learn as much as it could about the periphery of its empire, in Egypt, in Scythia, and, of course, in Persia itself. But perhaps the greatest proof of Herodotus' popularity in his own lifetime is the venomous remark of Thucydides at the beginning of his own *History.* By proudly declaring that he will not write an entertainment piece for a moment but a possession for all time, and by confidently asserting that he will exclude whatever is mythical or legendary from his work, Thucydides, as has long been recognized, must have been self-consciously distancing himself from the work of Herodotus (and perhaps also from that of Herodotean imitators of the day). Thucydides had other complaints to make of Hellanicus, for example, sloppiness in chronology, but it is unlikely that Thucydides or anyone else would have found Hellanicus pleasurable to read or hear—even for a moment. Herodotus' *History* not only appealed to a Greek world that was expanding and coming into contact with remote peoples, it was obviously a product of it. The investigations of Herodotus comprised a handbook for the Athenian empire, written with all the childlike wonder of Vasco da Gama on the coast of India.

But Pericles' misguided policies and the ensuing Peloponnesian War swiftly ended the era of ebullient expansionism in the Greek world, and the internecine struggles on which Thucydides brooded so profoundly obscured the work of his great predecessor. And yet only half a century later, in the flush of Isocratean pan-Hellenism and the new Athenian expansionism symbolized by the Second Athenian Confederacy, the work of Herodotus



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once more became filled with meaning for the Greeks. Theopompus' summary of Herodotus' *History* is symptomatic, and his debt to Herodotus in his own historical writing has been generally acknowledged from antiquity to the present. But it was Alexander the Great upon whom the substance of Herodotus' *History* (certainly not the style) had the greatest influence in the fourth century. Alexander's regard for Herodotus is nowhere attested explicitly, as it is for Homer. But the actions of Alexander leave us in no doubt that he knew his Herodotus intimately, nor should that be surprising since Alexander's avowed purpose was to take vengeance on the Persians for the very invasions of which Herodotus had been the chronicler. And the vengeance was to be taken in precisely those regions that Herodotus had so lovingly described.

It is odd that Alexander's knowledge of Herodotus has been so little discussed. Certain of his most important symbolic gestures point directly to Herodotean prototypes; and, although one or two of these might be explained by tradition rather than by the text itself, it is most unlikely that the totality of these gestures can be explained in that way.

Marching to the Hellespont, Alexander turned aside from Sestos, from which he was to make the crossing, in order to sacrifice at the tomb of Protesilaus at Elaeos, a little farther to the south on the European side. Protesilaus was believed to have been the first Greek to have disembarked on Asian soil when Agamemnon led his expedition against Troy. According to Arrian (*Anab.* II.11.5), Alexander's intention was to ensure that his own landing in Asia would be luckier than that of Protesilaus. But the real significance of Protesilaus' tomb for Alexander undoubtedly lay in its desecration at the hands of Xerxes' Persians more than a century earlier. The Greeks had exacted a savage vengeance for this desecration by nailing up the offender alive when the Persians withdrew. They stoned to death the man's son before his eyes as he was hanging impaled on a plank above a nearby town. This cautionary tale occupies the final chapters of the final book of Herodotus' *History* and leads up to the memorable conclusion in which Cyrus rejects a proposal to quit the Persian homeland for more comfortable circumstances in Asia Minor. It was the grandfather of the despoiler of the tomb of Protesilaus who had put the proposal to Cyrus.

That Alexander had Herodotus' narration in mind at the sacrifice at Elaeos is confirmed by his action shortly afterward, while crossing the Hellespont to Abydos on the Asian side. He poured into the sea a libation from a golden bowl: *spendein ek chrousês phialês es ton ponton*, in the account of Arrian (*Anab.* II.11.6). This grand gesture can only be understood as a defiant imitation of the libation of Xerxes at the Hellespont as recorded by Herodotus (VII.54) in virtually the same language: *spendôn ek chrouseês phialês Xerxês es tên thalassan*, "pouring a libation into the sea from a golden bowl." Equally clear echoes of Herodotus can be found in Alexander's conduct at the end of his expedition just as at the beginning. In Media, for example, he went to the Nêsaean plain to inspect the royal horses; and he could only have done this, as Arrian was aware (*Anab.* VII.13.1), because he wanted to check the famous report of Herodotus on the so-called Nêsaean horses assigned to that region in Book VII. Similarly, a local satrap in Media presented a troop of one hundred fighting women to Alexander as Amazons that had survived from the race of women described in detail by Herodotus. Neither Alexander nor the Alexander historians seem to have been deceived into thinking that these ladies actually were Amazons. They fought with one breast exposed, and Alexander accordingly kept them far from the army in case they were treated roughly by the Macedonian troops. But the powerful influence of Herodotus in this episode is scarcely in doubt.

Between the first and last years of Alexander's conquests, the shadow of Herodotus is never far away. Sometimes one can only infer a Herodotean inspiration, as when Alexander conceived a desire to sacrifice at the shrine of Heracles in Tyre—a shrine which had been discussed in detail by Herodotus in Book II. For that matter Alexander's acquaintance with Herodotus' account of the sites, legends, and antiquities of Egypt in that book may well have played an important role in his determination to make a detour into Egypt before striking at the heart of the Persian empire. It is hard to believe that when Alexander journeyed into the desert to consult the oracle at Siwah he had not in his mind Herodotus' report of the oracle.

An exceptionally secure inference of Herodotean inspiration in the expedition of Al-



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exander has been established recently in an admirable study of Alexander's plans to conquer Arabia by the young German historian Peter Högemann. Both on his way to the East and on his return to Babylon, Alexander expressed strong displeasure at the failure of the tribes of Arabia to send envoys to him and to submit to his authority. It is most unlikely that Alexander would have worried about the bedouin tribes of the Arabian peninsula had he not been aware of the testimony, in the third book of Herodotus, that in former times those same tribes had sent an annual tribute to the Persian king. Similarly, it is most unlikely that Alexander would have conceived a desire to be a god among the Arabs, alongside Dionysus and Ouranos, had he not believed from reading Herodotus that the Arabs had but two gods, namely Dionysus and Ourania (or Ouranos), whom the Arabs called Orotalt and Alilat respectively. Since the Arab pantheon certainly did have more than two gods, the doctrine upon which Alexander was relying seems to have been based upon the testimony of Herodotus, which is unique apart from Alexander's echo of it.

There is clearly much more work to be done in isolating the meaning of Herodotus' *History* for Alexander, but it is sufficient now to recognize its substantial importance. The rediscovery of Herodotus in the fourth century came hand in hand with the reawakening of Athenian imperialism and the growth of the idea of a pan-Hellenic crusade against the Persians. From the editorializing of Isocrates to the action of Alexander, the Greek world looked increasingly to the world beyond it. For that new age Herodotus was inevitably the supreme guide. His *History* justified Alexander at the same time that it informed and inspired him.

The collapse of Alexander's empire at his death and the fragmentation of the Greek world into the Hellenistic states carved out by his successors put an end to his vision. Interest in Herodotus declined accordingly, and the historian's text lay chiefly in the hands of scholars and teachers, who buried his work in commentary and exegesis. It was this reputation to which Cicero bore witness in the first century B.C., when he spoke so condescendingly of the Father of History. And yet, only a generation after Cicero, in the early years of the Augustan principate, Herodotus began again to receive some measure of praise, although we must be careful not to read too much into the praise of one historian of Halicarnassus for another. Nonetheless Augustus' briefly held dreams of conquering Arabia and Parthia are more than likely to have sent readers back once again to those Herodotean digressions and *logoi* that had inspired Alexander. In exactly the same way, the memory of Alexander had inspired Augustus himself.

But it was in the aftermath of the campaigns of Alexander's greatest emulator, the emperor Trajan, that the floodgates of Herodotean historiography were thrown wide open. Trajan's audacious expedition against the Parthians, his arrival at the head of the Persian Gulf, and his short-lived annexation of Mesopotamia had a profound effect on his contemporaries. In subsequent decades memory of the campaigns spawned treatments of the Near and Middle East in a way that brought the history and peoples of these regions closer to the readership of the Graeco-Roman world than at any time since the late fourth century B.C. It was no accident that the *Parthica* of Arrian of Nicomedia was the work of a consul and general from the Greek East, who is best known to us today as the author of the most detailed and authoritative history of Alexander the Great that survives from antiquity. Nor should it be surprising that this same author took the trouble to recount the exotic voyages of Alexander's admiral, Nearchus, in a rich Ionic Greek that proclaimed by its dialect the affinity of its subject matter and its historiographical genre with Herodotus, the Father of History.

The work of Arrian alone should have put Jacoby and those who followed him on guard against any facile assumptions made under the influence of Plutarch's treatise *On the Malignity of Herodotus*. Arrian's attitude to Herodotus is unreservedly positive, and, as his modern commentator, Brian Bosworth, has pointed out, the numerous and precise allusions to Herodotus in Arrian's history of Alexander are all demonstrably his own work and not borrowed from the earlier historians of Alexander, upon whom he necessarily relied for so much. It was Arrian who appreciated the Herodotean background for Alexander's visit to the plain of Nêsa with its famous horses or his search for the Amazons, and it was he who provided the Herodotean glosses on these episodes.

Meanwhile Arrian's contemporary, Appian,



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also turned to Herodotus for inspiration in writing history. In the new *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* Ewen Bowie rightly observes that, as a Greek from the provinces, Appian provided the first major treatment of the Roman Empire from a provincial viewpoint. He stresses that Appian's history of the rise of Rome was organized in discrete books on the various provincial regions rather than in a comprehensive chronological account of the history of the Mediterranean world as a whole. Bowie states, justly: "The organization of the history [of Appian] around provincial annexation recalls a classical model, Herodotus." As with Arrian, Appian reflects the expanded horizons of the second century, and in particular the enlarged consciousness that followed the campaigns of Trajan.

A little later in the second century the Parthian war of Lucius Verus provided a new impetus to regional and ethnographic history, although it would be risky to lay too much stress on the sycophantic and somewhat absurd historians adduced by Lucian in his essay on *How to Write History*. I have no doubt that the historians mentioned there were real writers, and not figments of Lucian's imagination, and rejoice that Professor Jones has been able to give a local habitation and a name to one of them, Crepereius Calpurnianus of Pompeiopolis, who began his history in the style of Thucydides. Lucian adduced a Herodotean historian of Lucius' Parthian wars by the name of Callimorphos, who happened to have been a doctor. He composed his work in the Ionic dialect. Nothing suggests that Callimorphos was a historian whom we would want to know better, but the use of Ionic is a distinctive sign of the mania for Herodotus in the second century A.D. Its affectation by such diverse writers as Arrian and Callimorphos would suggest that it was scarcely the preserve of rhetorical schools.

In fact, Ionic as a kind of proclamation of historiography in the Herodotean manner can be clearly traced from the years immediately after the death of Trajan. Although, as Arrian and Appian both demonstrate, Herodotean historiography did not necessarily have to be in Ionic, it often was. This feature provides an even more powerful clue to the taste for Herodotus and his way of writing history in the Graeco-Roman world. A wide-ranging work from the hand of a certain Cephalion, who interested himself in such diverse themes as the kingdom of the Assyrians, the Argonauts, and Alexander the Great, was organized precisely into nine books, to which were assigned the names of the nine Muses. The Greek was Ionic. Substantial fragments of Cephalion in Photius, Eusebius, and Malalas leave us in no doubt that this writer mixed mythology, legend, and Greek history down to Alexander in a manner that closely resembled the procedures of Herodotus. The names of the Muses may have been attached to Herodotus' books in the Hellenistic age, but by the time of the Roman Empire they were obviously an integral part of Herodotean historiography.

The division of material into nine books with the use of Ionic can also be seen in a historian of the late third century who brought his history down to the death of Carus. Caracalla's imitation of Alexander, as well as the humiliating confrontation later of a Roman emperor with the reestablished kingdom of Persia, will have provided this writer with ample scope for a work in the Herodotean manner. The historian's name was Eusebius, but I am reluctant to take up Eugenio Manni's tentative suggestion that this is none other than the celebrated ecclesiastical historian of the same name. And I am relieved to see that Professor Barnes felt no inclination to explain the ecclesiastical history as a kind of post-Herodotean oeuvre. But the existence of the work of this Eusebius is important in showing that the fascination with Herodotus spanned both the second and the third centuries and was directly associated with the enlarged ambitions of the Roman Empire in that period.

In many ways the most distinctive of the Herodotean writers of these two centuries falls almost in the middle of the period between Cephalion and Eusebius. I refer to Asinius Quadratus. This historian, from a distinguished senatorial family, wrote a history of Rome from the foundation of the city to the time of Severus Alexander. He wrote in Ionic Greek and equipped his history with the general title of *Chilietêris*. Although the work is lost, apart from fragments and allusions, it is clear that we are dealing with a history of an entire millennium in the Herodotean style. The fragments make plain that the substance was no less Herodotean, with a special interest in geography, local traditions, and the etymology of local names (for example, Tigranocerta is said to mean Tigranoupolis).



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A history of Rome commemorating a millennium in the third century A.D. points unequivocally to a single date for its inspiration—namely, the great millennial celebrations of the city of Rome held by Philip the Arab in 248 A.D. The fact that the history extended to the reign of Severus Alexander, according to the Suda, gave Jacoby considerable trouble and seriously obscured the significance of Quadratus' work. Tracing a millennium back from the death of the last Severan, Jacoby drew the peculiar conclusion that Asinius Quadratus must have brought back the date of the foundation of Rome to coincide with the first Olympiad in 776. Eugenio Manni is here quite right to jettison this bizarre hypothesis and to insist on the relationship between the *Chilietêris* and the millennial celebrations of Philip. We may assume that Philip was fulsomely commemorated in Quadratus' work, presumably at the beginning and at the end, but there is no need to be puzzled about his failure to bring the actual history down to 248. That would have involved an account of Philip's rise to power under Gordian III, and Quadratus would understandably have had difficulties with that. What is significant is that in Quadratus we have another major illustration of Herodotean historiography in celebration of the global aspirations of the Roman state.

Among the lesser works of Quadratus was a Parthian history of uncertain date. Even though the Romans were apt to interchange the terms *Parthian* and *Persian*, I feel disinclined to believe that Quadratus' *Parthica* was a history of Persian wars and would prefer to see in this work a celebration of the eastern campaigns of Caracalla as another of the great attempts to emulate the conquests of Alexander the Great.

If we look beyond those historians and other prose writers of the second and third centuries A.D. who directly proclaimed their indebtedness to Herodotus by the use of the Ionic dialect, or by the division of the history into nine books named after the Muses, or by the organization of history by regions rather than simple chronology, we can see that the influence of Herodotus remained pervasive. The rhetor Aelius Aristides betrays an intimate knowledge of Herodotus' *History* and cites it dozens and dozens of times. In a remarkable passage in his Egyptian *logos*, Aristides acknowledges the inspiration he received from Herodotus' second book and, while disagreeing with him on individual points, explicitly dissociates himself from critics of the historian. In his treatment of the rising of the Nile, Aristides declares (XXXVI.57 Keil), "I have not discussed this so that I might tastelessly censure Herodotus, for I am not one of those who have endeavored to do such things. Moreover I do not sympathize with those who do. I feel grateful to Herodotus for the very love of Egypt which he first inspired in us. And in other respects, to speak candidly, I cherish the man." Whether Aristides had Plutarch in mind when he wrote these words is beyond certainty, but I should not be surprised if he did; and the evidence presented so far would suggest that Aristides gives us the opinion of the majority.

The traveler and periegete Pausanias, whose guide to Greece has been so splendidly elucidated in a recent book by Christian Habicht, is another of those non-historians for whom Herodotus was a primary source of inspiration. Stylistic echoes have, of course, long been noticed, but Pausanias' indebtedness goes far beyond that into antiquarian details of both legend and history. Habicht put the matter very clearly: "Pausanias is in fact as close to, and as fond of, Herodotus as the separation of some six hundred years allows." Later in his work, Habicht observes that there are only two historians whom Pausanias quotes often, Herodotus and Thucydides, but that Herodotus was his model. The concentration on these two historians of the fifth century B.C. fits perfectly with the impression given by Lucian in his treatise *How to Write History*.

All this diverse and compelling evidence for Herodotus and Rome has been available, if not always easily accessible, for centuries. When brought together it presents a case for Herodotus that takes him out of the rhetorical schools and into the mainstream of Graeco-Roman cultural life. It presents a case that restores Herodotus to a fame in antiquity from which there was no need of the antiquarians of the sixteenth century to rescue him.

The strength of this case was confirmed only a few decades ago when a new inscription at Pergamum in Asia Minor gave us, for the first time, the date of the historian Aulus Claudius Charax, whose fragments Jacoby had been unable to place within a period of six centuries. His original annotation for the



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date reads *Urzeit—?*. Now that we know that Charax the historian was the consul Charax in 147 (who was revealed to us in the Ostian *Fasti*), his history in forty books is securely anchored to the middle of the second century A.D. The fragments of Charax's history have recently been analyzed in an admirable book by Osvalda Andrei. Although Charax neither wrote in Ionic nor divided his work into nine books, it is transparently clear that the inspiration of his history was Herodotus through and through. His antiquarian curiosity and his interest in local traditions is only part of the Herodotean character so acutely anatomized by Andrei. What is most remarkable in Charax, and quite properly receives Andrei's greatest emphasis, is the unblushing collocation of mythology and history. Charax found as much room for the myth of Io or the story of the birth of Dionysus as he did for the *Lusus Troiae* or the Emperor Augustus. With an ecumenical concern for the antiquities, myths, and history of both the western and eastern Roman Empire, Charax now emerges as one of those writers who, like Cephalion and Pausanias, repudiated Thucydides' banishment of *to muthôdes* from the workshop of the historian. He realized that myths provided an important historical link between past and present and that they often explained the ambitions and conduct of cities and peoples in the contemporary world.

Accordingly, the very naivete of Herodotus, that childlike simplicity that so beguiled his readers, embodies a sophisticated view of the world that is both more subtle and more open than the constipated inwardness of Thucydides. When the Greeks and the Romans looked beyond their boundaries and themselves, in eras of expansion and international relations, Herodotus was there to guide and inspire them. That is why Theopompus and Alexander the Great read Herodotus. Above all, that is why the Greek and Roman writers of the high Roman Empire—historians, orators, and periegetes—turned to Herodotus as their model, sometimes in style and structure but more generally in outlook and method.

Perhaps Herodotus' greatest posthumous contribution to the historiography of antiquity—and, by extension, western civilization—is the restoration of popular legend to the proper domain of the historian. It is *to muthôdes*, "the mythic," which gives Herodotus' work its elusive profundity. Sightseeing and rhetoric are both incidental, or rather supervenient, features of Herodotus' manner. And that means that the sixteenth century may not, in fact, have understood Herodotus so well as the Greeks and Romans of the second and third centuries A.D. It also means that there is no danger of ever seeing Herodotean historiography as a rhetorical construct. In revising Arnaldo Momigliano's account of Herodotus' place in the history of historiography, we can strengthen his case against the metahistory of Hayden White and put historiography back into history.



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# Making the Grade

## Memoirs of a Harvard Grader

THEODORE PAPPAS

Although there are few thrills greater in all of teaching than to happen upon the sprouts of a budding young mind, a student who thinks independently and who can really write, I know of few teachers who look forward to spending a weekend with a stack of freshly written student essays or a twenty-inch mound of ink-filled examination blue books. University professors, however, are typically in a more advantageous position than their counterparts at smaller colleges, for the former usually have access to a labor pool of graduate students to read through and grade these essays and examinations for them, rather in the way a prosperous homeowner is able to hire help to mow his lawn. I worked as one of these graduate student graders, academic lawn boys, during my graduate school days at Harvard, and I am writing this essay from notes taken during a forty-eight-hour "mowing" of some 201 examination blue books. To cling to the grass-cutting metaphor a moment longer, graders of college examination essays are like mowers of unattended fields: neither can be certain of the mysteries or the monstrosities that await them beneath the surface. What one finds under the blade can amaze, amuse, bedevil, and befuddle—and sometimes all these things at once. From my experience as a graduate student grader, though, I should like in this essay to concentrate on four basic types of student performance on essay examinations—performances by students I think of as Miscreants, Apologists, Iconoclasts, and Relativists—and it is to these four types I now turn.

✪ THEODORE PAPPAS is a free-lance writer in Boston.

Montaigne claimed that "we can meet a man with a crooked and deformed body without being moved, but we can not bear to meet an illogical mind without becoming outraged." Perhaps it was best for Montaigne's mental balance that he never had to encounter any of those students, the Miscreants, who seem congenitally unable to follow the most straightforward instructions. This inability to follow instructions is a perennial enemy of faculty the world over, and it is the one characteristic that virtually all Miscreants share. No matter how many times directions are underlined and highlighted and emboldened in capital letters, a handful of Miscreants will forever be struck with a timely case of temporary blindness. If the instructions call for answers emphasizing the concrete, the definite, the particular, and the specific, Miscreants will dependably respond with the abstract, the general, the nebulous, and the vague. If asked to print their names in ink on the front of each blue book, Miscreants will naturally sign their name in pencil at the end of each essay. If instructed to write "FOUR ESSAYS ONLY: NOT THREE, NOT FIVE, BUT FOUR ESSAYS ONLY," Miscreants will always write six (and then, at the last moment, cross *one* of them out).

Disobeying instructions, however, is but one of the many ways in which Miscreants hinder the grading of their essays. They are never satisfied with merely providing graders with all that is unnecessary and entirely unwanted: they must also muddy and obscure whatever treasures they do leave behind. For Miscreants are the students who only buy and use pens whose ink is guaranteed to smear



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upon touch. They are the thrifty utilitarians who see no reason why they should not squeeze three written lines into the space generally allowed for one. They are the students who write both vertically and horizontally in the margins of the pages and in the creases of the blue books, perhaps because they are unable to bear the utter feeling of defeat that would naturally accompany a request for a second blue book. They are the students who cannot resist the challenge of beginning blue book number two with an essay that continues from blue book number three (which is no easy feat!). And they are the closet cartographers of the academic world, whose essays are adorned with so many arrows, additions, and interlineations that their blue books can only be compared to early rough drafts of Rand McNally maps.

Miscreants leave graders both bedeviled and bemused, but the effect of an Apologist is a bit less predictable. Students most often turn into Apologists when they misjudge the time allowed for the exam and fail to write all the required essays. Apparently out of fear and often in haste, these desperate students set forth a last-minute apology in the hope that this small show of remorse might somehow mollify the grader and better their prospects for leniency. Apologists of the neophyte rank are the easiest to recognize, for they resort to the most hackneyed of excuses. They are especially fond of a stratagem that I call the "end-around": "I apologize for not getting to the first question, but I started from the end and I ran out of time."

Apologies that contain excuses as lame and lifeless as this one simply do more harm than good, and freshmen and sophomores would do well to take heed of the more experienced apologetic maneuvers of juniors and seniors. For veteran Apologists well realize that, in order to win even a morsel of mercy from the least red-pen slashing of graders, they must infuse their apologies not only with humor, but also with wit. Apologists of this caliber hope to command instant forgiveness for their examinational sins because of their mastery of the art of the memorable apology. The upperclassman who failed to write a required essay on Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov,* the classic nineteenth-century novel about indolence, is an outstanding example of the breed at its most sly: "I apologize for failing to finish my exam. Though I probably had enough time to write a quick essay on *Oblomov,* I just couldn't get motivated to do it."

Illegible handwriting can also occasion apologies of exceptional quality. Graphological Apologists are usually quite willing to acknowledge the horrendous nature of their script, and they never seem hesitant to preface their blue books with such simple, straightforward apologies as: "Please forgive my poor penmanship!" "I apologize for my sloppy writing!" "I'm sorry for this mess!" These students are sincere in their apologies (as evidenced by the inevitable use of exclamation marks), but what they fail to realize is that graders detest these simple and stripped-down declarations of remorse. Graders despise them because they are merely one-sided coins: they constitute an apology, but not an excuse. Whenever graders are forced to squint and struggle with a meaningless script of indecipherable shapes and arbitrary slants, they believe the student responsible for the abomination should at least be considerate enough to give a better explanation of the problem *at hand.* For the larger, more significant questions—those that forever torment and tantalize the grader—are left unanswered. Has your pitiful penmanship been diagnosed as a disease? Should you be quarantined? Does this affliction raise its nasty head only on exams that I grade? Does it also traumatize your lab reports and personal checks?

Only once did I encounter an Apologist who had the courtesy to address the fascinating question of causation. This student's problem was severe: his handwriting resembled a Jackson Pollock drip painting. His apology, however, was of Nobel Prize caliber:

> I apologize to you in advance for my atrocious handwriting. Unfortunately, I have congenital muscle weakness in my upper back that (when my hand begins to get tired) creates spasms in my hand muscles, which consequently distort my writing. So if you need a transcription of my essays (and I'm sure you will), please call me at. . . .

Graders are sympathetic to such pleas. I was particularly appreciative that the student left me his phone number. I needed to call him for a transcription of his apology.

The most audacious Apologist I encountered was a student femme fatale. The setting was two weeks before final exams; the student was a beautiful blonde senior; and the in-



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tended victim was me. She approached me after class one day and asked if I would be willing to answer some questions about the lectures and assigned readings. She offered to treat me to dinner if we could meet for such a purpose, and to this I agreed. (Although fully aware of the conflicts of interests that could arise for graders who socialize with the students they are hired to grade, I knew, for reasons that will soon become clear, that I was safe on this particular occasion.)

I expected our meeting to take place over a burger and a beer in Harvard Square, but this was not to be the case. She insisted on taking me to one of Boston's finer Back Bay restaurants. Here the setting was right for both elegant dining and scintillating discourse: chateaubriand, cabernet sauvignon, and discussions of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and the dwindling effectiveness of Red Sox pitching. Everything seemed perfect, almost *too* perfect. She then broached the subject of grading, bringing the evening to a sudden climax. She had heard that I was to be the grader of her upcoming final exam, and because of this she wanted to set forth the following apology: "I *apologize* if this evening puts you, as my grader, in a compromising position, for I certainly had no intentions. . . ." I wanted to believe her self-proclaimed sincerity, but her subsequent suggestion that I join her for after-dinner nightcaps back in her room did nothing to allay my ever-growing suspicions. I then played the ace that I had been holding all evening should just this occasion arise. Assuring her that our evening together would cause me no ethical difficulties, I released the card: "I'm not your grader. Your last name begins with *P*, and I'm only grading the *A*'s through the *O*'s!" Odd—after-dinner nightcaps were canceled owing to a sudden bout of stomach cramps.

The most memorable essays, however, come from the Iconoclasts. These are the students who seem to have taken passionately to heart Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, particularly that part when Johnson claims, "when I was a young man, being anxious to distinguish myself, I was perpetually starting new propositions." The Iconoclasts tend to manifest this Johnson-like yearning for "new propositions" most clearly in essays concerning literature and history, which in turn give rise to some of the most ingenious reinterpretations of literature and history known to man. A classic example of this is the young woman who took deconstructionism to the nth degree. She used what I call the great Henny Youngman-like one-liner approach to literary iconoclasm: "Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is an epic tale of Napoleon's conquering of France."

Other Iconoclasts take a more methodical, Woody Allen–like approach to their essays, as exemplified by the young man who wrote an essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. This student painstakingly laid out how the character Wilhelm used the phrase "elective affinities" in the story; how Wilhelm's usage of the phrase related to its meaning in chemistry; how Wilhelm's concept of "affinities" symbolized his relationship to his wife; how Wilhelm's personality mirrored a Schiller-like notion of mankind; how Wilhelm's conflicts in the story reflected Goethe's own conflicts in life. Page after page the essay rolled on, filling just under two full blue books. And despite its great length, the essay was both beautifully written and thoughtfully composed. There was, alas, only one problem: there is no Wilhelm in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*.

All of history is vulnerable to attacks from Iconoclasts. Their essays can blanket entire historical areas with utter destruction. This was ever-so-apparent when a freshman became hopelessly entangled in the tricky web of German names that begin with "Sch." Mistaking poets for philosophers and philosophers for poets, she pitifully confused Schiller, Schelling, Schlegel, Schopenhauer, and Schleiermacher. She ravaged and rewrote history with a passion that would make Soviet revisionists quiver with envy, and she needed but fifteen minutes to transform beyond recognition the entire course of nineteenth-century European thought. (Schiller even became Schopenhauer, with the *Aesthetic Letters* becoming a treatise on suffering and despair.) Yet, as devastating to the past as her iconoclasm was, I believe history escaped with a relatively light sentence. It could have been worse; she had the option of writing an additional essay on Hegel, Hölderlin, Heidegger, and Heine.

Harvard undergraduate Iconoclasts have even rewritten Marx's position on capitalism. In a question concerning the *Communist Manifesto*, students were asked what objections to communism Marx had envisioned the



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bourgeoisie making, and how Marx would have responded to these objections. Apparently pressed for time, one student hurriedly set forth the following key as a preface to her essay: *B* would stand for the bourgeois objection, and *C* would stand for the communist response. Line after line included such dialogue as:

*B*: "Communism will mean the destruction of the family."

*C*: "Wrong, the bourgeoisie have already destroyed the family, with children being transformed into instruments of labor. . . ."

*B*: "Communism will mean the destruction of countries and nationalities."

*C*: "Wrong, the working men of the world have no country, and thus we can not take from them what they do not have."

Though her "essay" was curt, her information was clear; that is, until she began to run out of time, when she became confused, forgot her code, and *B*'s became *C*'s and *C*'s became *B*'s. In an ideological turnabout of extraordinary proportions, Marx suddenly began condemning the working class, denouncing Friedrich Engels, and proclaiming the virtues of profits and private property. Glasnost and perestroika have not gone anywhere near so far.

Along with the Iconoclast's proclivity to rewrite history is a tendency to redefine the accepted rules of writing. For some reason that neither Freud nor Jung could ever explain, timed essay exams have the cathartic ability to bring to the surface a student's subliminal aversion to clarity and conciseness; they tend to rid students of any fear of retribution that might arise from trampling the sacred grounds of Strunk and White. The examples of such transgressions are endless. One student's essay was twenty pages long, encompassing nearly three hundred lines. He touched upon economics, history, philosophy, and sociology; Marxism, Leninism, Freudianism, and existentialism; alienation, exploitation, ratiocination, and sublimation. The student's Proust-like thoroughness was impressive. I had only one cómplaint: the essay was all in *one* paragraph.

Punctuation marks generally prove most unsettling to Iconoclasts. For example, one Iconoclast harbored some deep-felt fear or hatred of periods. Whenever she came to the end of a sentence, she drew in a horizontal arrow that pointed to the right. This habit of hers was most distracting, and I was torn between two conclusions. I thought perhaps she was simply an overly sensitive, socially conscious student who felt the period connoted too depressing a sense of termination in the nuclear age. On the other hand, I thought she might only have been trying to be helpful: the left-to-right arrows perhaps designed to help all those graders accustomed to reading only Hebrew or vertical columns of Oriental script.

But there is one passage from an Iconoclast's essay that deserves special mention. Of all the senseless sentences, dangling participles, and verbless paragraphs I ever encountered, the following sentence (Is it, I wonder, a sentence?) undoubtedly wins the Gold:

> Schiller's notion of form drive and play drive, with the shaping by the form of the content arising from the play, would apply to mankind not only in his appreciation of the Absolute through creating, but in imposing the form qualities of humanity over the animal qualities of the play drive.

Naturally, I whispered to myself.

Relativists make up my last category. Although graders encounter them only infrequently, essays by Relativists are nonetheless memorable. Their essays often exhibit the inventiveness of an Iconoclast and the outrageousness of an Apologist, if not a happy synthesis of the two. Relativists of the 1980s, however, are not the same as their notorious namesakes of the 1960s: the flower-powered students who denounced as irrelevant any discipline, discourse, dissertation, or debate that could not be used directly as weapons in the war against elitism, imperialism, racism, and sexism; the students whose vociferous cries of "It's not relevant!" still ring hauntingly in the ears of many professors.

The latter-day Relativists that I have in mind share no particular political perspective through which they filter and focus their "relativist" tendencies. They are "Relativists" in only one specific sense: they share an unswerving confidence and conviction that the past is forever *relative* to our understanding of the present because "parallel experiences" always tie yesterday to today. As diehard



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creatures of continuity, not change, these students find no unique strands in the often tangled skein of history. For example, the Ivan Boeskys and the Gary Harts of today are merely reincarnations of the robber barons and the Grover Clevelands (respectively) of yesterday. Similarly, Joseph McCarthy and the Red scare of 1950 was merely a tragic rerun and a more modern rendition of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and the Red scare of 1920. Nor (much to my surprise) was the punk rock movement anything novel. When yellow-haired rockers exploded with songs of anger and rebellion and hatred and derision, they were merely acting out a historical parallel (whether consciously or unconsciously) to the outrageous and offensive artwork of the post–World War I Dadaists: the underground bars of London and New York played the role of Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire, as Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious of the notorious Sex Pistols became the new Tristan Tzaras and Jean Arps of the mid-1970s.

Relativists can often find historical parallels and precedents that are both clever and filled with insight, but they can just as often cite examples that are both laughable and outrageous. Their lust for analogies can frequently lead to a straining of their arguments and a stretching of the facts to the point of absurdity. The Relativist who found parallels between Dadaism and punk rock is a prime case in point. Just when I was beginning to fall prey to this student's shrewdly argued essay—to the extent that both movements were nihilistic and sardonic and absurd, and both sought to mock all values and conventions—his continuing commentary on twentieth-century art soon reached a state of sacrilege: he compared the wonderfully savage and sophisticated drawings of Germany's famed satirist George Grosz with (hold on to your seats) the Doonesbury comic strips of Garry Trudeau! (If I remember correctly, the blasphemous phrase was, "Grosz, that Garry Trudeau of the 1920s. . . .") Even more brazenly outrageous than this was the Relativist who claimed that a precedent for Oliver North's channeling of guns to the Nicaraguan Contras could be found in the existentialist writings of Dostoyevski and Camus. His rough and rambling tangent made bizarre references to Roquentins, Reagans, and Nicaraguan Karamazovs; Contra soldiers, CIA agents, and Christ-like figures of Central American origins; drug peddling, gunrunning, and metamorphosing rats of some strange symbolic nature.

Nor did I expect a Relativist to cite a personal parallel between a summer camp experience and Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, but one young woman did. Knowing that Turgenev's novel pivots on the insolent, rude, provocative, and rough-mannered Bazarov—who tolerates no human foible and wants only to tear down all institutions—I could not help asking myself: What kind of summer camp did this kid attend? And I must admit that her entire argument now escapes me. All I can remember is the picture that immediately shot to mind—that of a pigtailed young woman, with a backpack on one shoulder and a canoe balanced on her head, walking beneath a wooden sign reading: Welcome to the Bazarov Camp for Summer Nihilists! Ah, a conscientious and imaginative grader's work is never done.



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# *Coming Home Late and Alone*

DENNIS SAMPSON

That was the summer
my father had cancer and demanded to be left alone when he slept
and my mother strung a cord from solitude
to solitude, scolding us for making the slightest noise,
bursting into tears when we sassed her.

Crossing the kitchen floor
and opening the refrigerator brimming with shimmering light
I dared my mother to reproach me. "Is that you?" she asked.
"Yes," I said. "It is me." "It's midnight, Dennis.
You need to go to bed."

And so I slipped off my shoes and tiptoed
past my father's room where I saw him bent over
reeds to his clarinet, all neatly aligned on his bedspread,

and I wanted to remember even the glow
around him and the delicacy
with which he fitted the finest reed into his mouthpiece.

Entering my room
without turning on my light, so that through my window
I could see the lovely cup of the moon going down
over Duncan's grove, I sat on my bed and saw my father

over a year ago,
lifting his clarinet above the heads of the orchestra,
holding the final note of the solo
closing my eyes
until the trombone took over
and my father acknowledged the audience with a nod.

✪ DENNIS SAMPSON is the author of *The Double Genesis*, a book of poems published by Story Line Press.



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# *TEACHING*

# George P. Elliott and the Common Reader

LYN CAMIRE TISDALE

The idea of the common reader, which George P. Elliott said "has fallen away sadly," is founded on the individual appreciation of literature noted in Samuel Johnson's respectful words: "I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for, by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honors." The unscholarly reader's common sense is not mere practicality but a fuller sense of common experience of life, and it forms the basis for the belief that literature in itself has the power to communicate truths about life directly to the well-disposed reader. George Elliott saw the idea of the common reader threatened by fragmentation of the reading public into literary markets and by critics who conveyed mandated opinions of works in certain categories. Elliott cared deeply about the survival of the idea of the common reader since, to him, the primary and various experience of literature, appropriately guided by scholarship, revealed the enduring powers of writing to move and delight the reader. He made the common reader's unscholarly appreciation of literature the basis of his long career as a university professor.

George Elliott himself seemed an ideal model of the non-specialist, though he spent more than thirty years teaching on university faculties. I first met him in 1978 when I was a student at Syracuse University. He had been teaching on the English department faculty for more than ten years, but he seemed a charming anomaly among his colleagues. He passed through the hallways with a measured but eager step, and though he was almost sixty years old, he had the unmistakable air of youth. His expression seemed a combination of engagement, an amused acceptance of his own civilized bearing, and the detached warmth of a cordial guest in someone else's home. He spoke informally but politely with other professors, the department secretaries, and students of all kinds, and he could often be seen in animated conversation near the department mailboxes or in doorways.

There was no doubt that Elliott had an air of authority, but his authority did not depend on setting. During my first year at Syracuse, which coincided with the renovation of the Hall of Languages, his office was a cubicle on the second floor of Archbold Gym, where the rest of the English department was located. The next year he moved to a new fourth-floor corner office in the Hall of Languages, whose stylish windows admitted light upward. He never seemed impatient or uncomfortable in the gym, even though large fans on poles whirred continuously, and he never seemed proud of his office in the Hall of Languages. He seemed rather to be pleased that his office was now a convenient place for him to meet with others. Talking with him in his office, a visitor got the sense that his stay in that office was temporary and that his life at the university was an essential part, but a part only, of a life that extended well beyond the campus.

Elliott had a nature that was admirably composed, a nature well suited to his career as a teacher. Not long after his death in 1980, I was surprised and disturbed to read an essay published in THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR by an acquaintance of Elliott, Robert Brustein, in which Elliott's university affiliation was seen as a flight based on prejudice and resentment. According to Brustein, Elliott fled the legiti-

✪ LYN CAMIRE TISDALE is managing editor for an educational publisher in Baltimore, Maryland.



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mate literary establishment in New York and took his resentment to the backwaters of academia. Elliott's essay "Who is *We*?" showed him to have well-founded objections to an establishment closed to certain elements of the reality of life he saw, an establishment in which he himself, among many others he knew, could not be fully accommodated. But Elliott had a judiciousness and sense of proportion of the highest order. He was not inclined to overvalue injury to himself but clearly thought other occupations, especially his love of literature, more worthy of his attention. When he read at his desk with an expression of perfect concentration and complete engagement, he seemed a man on the best of terms with his circumstances. The results of his admirable composure were made plain by his many accomplishments as a teacher at Syracuse.

George Elliott was a writer of considerable literary reputation. His novels, stories, poems, anthologies, and his remarkable essays had been published over a span of twenty years, but he worked as if he recognized no real privilege to his status. A list of his activities makes it impossible to imagine that he had time for his own literary work. During my two years at Syracuse, Elliott directed the graduate writing program, led graduate writing workshops, taught seminars in literature and criticism, conducted a successful search for permanent members of the writing program faculty, served as a volunteer faculty representative on the freshman English committee, delivered his remarkable lecture "Snarls of Beauty" at the University of Virginia, and found time to fulfill administrative responsibilities for Yaddo, the writer's colony. It isn't hard to understand why his novel in progress, known as his "Byzantium novel," was not completed during his last years of teaching. He clearly believed that continuing personal effort was required to maintain the standard demanded by his own commitment. Amazingly, he could often be found reading at his desk, as if his responsibilities were limited to enjoying literature.

Elliott's connection with the Syracuse graduate writing program began when he started teaching in the program with his colleagues Donald Dike and William Wasserstrom. The program bore the influence of Elliott's faith in the natural variousness and tradition of literature and literary experience. "Science and technology really do progress," he wrote. "Only fools speak of progress in the arts." To establish the sense of a continuing and nonevolutionary tradition, the originators established a program with more literature courses than writing courses and leading to degrees in literature rather than fine arts. Graduate students with a writing concentration in fiction or poetry took comprehensive exams and had orals as did the graduate students in literature. The program requirements did not specify which literature courses had to be taken, but it was difficult for a writing student to avoid contact with literature beyond the contemporary and with teachers and students of all kinds.

By the time I went to Syracuse, the writing program had been under way for several years, and Donald Dike had fallen ill with cancer. Though he continued to teach intermittently at his home, he was unable to help administer the program. In Dike's absence, Elliott conducted a search for full-time, permanent faculty for the program. His acquaintance with other writers seemed endless, and he was apparently on cordial terms with all of them. He was not inclined to spend his time making phone calls or arranging meeting rooms or class visits, but he worked with full attention in a spirit of agreeable resignation to details. He set up timetables for visiting writers; he wrote letters; he arranged lunches at the faculty dining room for visitors to meet graduate students; he interviewed; he assured that each visitor was present for a meeting with the English department faculty; and he helped arrange accommodations for each visitor's stay. Though he knew many writers personally, the effort of hiring new faculty members forced him to put aside his own writing for several months. One night, after an evening session of the Dante seminar he was teaching, he said with unusual fatigue that he had never gone for such a long period without writing. But when he was preparing to retire in 1980, the staff of the program was impressive in quality and variety. The poet Philip Booth was a continuing presence, and the rest of the faculty included Ray Carver, Tess Gallagher, Tobias Wolff, and Hayden Carruth. Though the Syracuse writing program was in many ways Elliott's creation, he did not demand writers with tastes or methods like his



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own but searched instead for committed writers who would assure the health of the program for many years to come.

Elliott's diligence in the program also extended to teaching small writing classes, in which he set up a rigorous schedule of reading and writing. For each session he assigned outside reading, usually from the *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction* edited by his friend R. V. Cassill. Elliott chose stories for their variety, not because they were all suited to his taste. The works included stories by Carson McCullers, Chekhov, John Cheever, Yukio Mishima, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, Balzac, Borges, and Philip Roth. He sometimes cited certain limitations in a story, but he seemed to enjoy talking about stories of all kinds. The demanding reading schedule showed Elliott's taste for a variety of different writers and revealed his belief that a writer learns best by knowing what others have done. By comparison, a later class in the program with another teacher required readings concerned with why and how writers write. The writing impulse itself was an inviolable subject that Elliott did not presume to discuss.

Students could only speculate about what Elliott's own preferences were among the stories he assigned. Rarely did his own taste in writing, which leaned toward the conservative, enter into the discussion. Once, after leading a discussion of a Robert Coover story called "The Babysitter," Elliott was closing his book and picking up his pocket watch when a student asked what he really thought about the story. Elliott looked up, accepted the dare agreeably, and said, "I think it's dirty." He laughed with everyone else, but his personal assessment of a story's ambitions never made him reject the story for discussion. Except for what he stated, nothing about his opinions could be known for certain.

Besides the anthology reading, Elliott maintained a demanding schedule for reading student manuscripts. He was known for writing very little in a manuscript apart from pencil marks under a word, an *X* in the margin for a misspelling, or an elaborately quavering *K* to stand for *awkward*. In class, he customarily started out discussion of a student story with a general comment, such as, "Hemingway once said that storytelling is the art of leaving out." The students were then invited to discuss the connection of the remark with the story at hand. If his focusing idea didn't work to begin discussion, he tried another approach or asked the students for general reactions. He did not direct discussion to suit his own ends, but neither would he let it disintegrate into a free-for-all or antagonistic argument. He had a finely developed sense of productive conversation, and he maintained a kind of courtesy by his example. Only rarely, and in the most delicate of circumstances, did this courtesy fail.

Elliott used his judgment in deciding when student work was ready for other readers and would benefit from class discussion. Even when a work was ready, some elements in the story were not considered fit subjects for discussion. One of these subjects was the writer's wisdom in writing the story in the first place. The function of the class was not to tell a writer why to write or what to write about, but to provide a considered response to a story. Through his method, Elliott kept the emphasis on matters that could be talked about productively. His own response to a story was detached, though always given with cordial consideration. Nor was every story as good as another. A student interested in Elliott's evaluation quickly learned that "pretty good" was praise of a high order. The precision of his hierarchy of judgment could be measured by his opinion of *Don Quixote* and *War and Peace*, which he called, simply, "the incomparable."

Elliott was never interested in developing a cult of followers among his writing students. At times he gave control of a session to a visiting writer. Very different in taste and manner from Elliott, Ronald Sukenick arrived in the classroom wearing cowboy boots and smiling cheerfully. Sukenick took the seat at the front of the room, and Elliott sat in relaxed but deferent silence to his side. That day a Chekhov story was scheduled for discussion. Sukenick led the way from one artful passage to another, asking students now and then if they shared his admiration. At the end of the discussion, Sukenick turned to Elliott and asked if he had anything to say about the story. Elliott thought and said, "It seems to me a pretty complicated story. I think he's saying quite a lot. He's more than just a disenchanted liberal." Sukenick laughed and said, "And what are you, George?" Elliott



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laughed too, and his idea was never discussed. He welcomed, it seemed, the complications of variety.

Elliott's teaching method was admirably defined in his essay "Teaching Writing":

> I have constantly aspired to open the classroom door each time with my mind full of the text for the day, whether it is *Lear* or a student's first draft of a story, but empty of ideas about it, and then dive in. This method doesn't always work, of course, but when it does, there's nothing better. I would rather fail at trying to teach this way than to have spent a lifetime successfully not-failing.

His graduate seminar on Dante was a fine example of the method at its most successful. Every night the seminar met, Elliott came into class in his winter coat and hat, carrying only the book we were scheduled to discuss. He took off his coat and hat, sat down, and set his pocket watch on the table to his right with an air of considered eagerness. He looked very much as if he himself were interested in knowing what he would say.

He trusted the indirection of open discussion, but he would not tolerate ignorance in literary judgments. Because an appreciation of Dante's works requires knowledge of Dante's time and thought, Elliott assigned each student a report on such topics as Aquinas, Aristotle, the saints, Greek mythology, and iconography. Before discussion began, the student scheduled for that day gave a brief report while Elliott listened attentively. At the end, he often expanded courteously on any points he thought especially important, and sometimes he provided a much-needed synthesis of what had been said. Never did he seem bored by the presentations, though he himself knew more on every topic than anyone else in the room.

He considered several translations of the *Divine Comedy* and finally chose the Sinclair translation, which incorporates facing-page translations. The translation was in prose, but Elliott believed it had been carefully done and conveyed the spirit of the poem with fewer distractions than a translation in English verse. In addition, we would have the advantage of having access to the original language of the poem. He did not insist on the purity of a verse-to-verse translation, but he did think it important to imagine the sounds, even through faltering mental pronunciation, of the powerful original work. I recognized the wisdom of his choice when reading, with a vague sense of Italian pronunciation, these words at the Gates of Hell:

> Per me si va nella città dolente,
> Per me si va nell'etterno dolore,
> Per me si va tra la perduta gente.
>
> Through me the way into the woeful city,
> Through me the way to the eternal pain,
> Through me the way to the lost people.

In that same passage, I doubted whether any translation of the terrible casting off of hope could ever approach the Italian, which I remember to this day: "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate."

Our reading of the *Divine Comedy* in that seminar was not to be a study but a more immediate experience of the poem. We considered the fourteenth-century poem as we would have done a work from our own time, and no one in the class, least of all Elliott, was excluded from the communal life in the first lines:

> In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.

Elliott called our attention to the Florentine patriot Farinata, who "was lifting up his breast and brow as if he had great scorn of Hell." We considered the fate of the lovers Francesca and Paolo, condemned forever to a love for each other that excludes all other understanding. Of them Elliott said, just before we took a break, "That's fine for a couple of hours, but forever?" We considered the fact that treachery to guests should be a greater evil than treachery to country or family, comparing it to the kiss of Judas and reflecting on the particular entanglement of will and intent involved. The *Divine Comedy* was not a quaint relic from the past but a work of life. We read in accordance with Elliott's early discovery, noted in his essay "A Brown Fountain Pen," that the *Divine Comedy* was more than a synthesis of medieval history, faith, and art. It was a "superbly coherent dream" that had been "pressed out of [Dante] more humanly, by reaction to what he had come upon when he had lost his way in the dark wood."



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Dante's imagery and the absolute system of his Hell had a strong effect, but Elliott guided us through the *Inferno* without flinching from the ideas or the human suffering portrayed. Our discussions were controlled and detached, but it was impossible to remain completely detached from the poem to participate in discussion. For at least one student in the class, the effort was too difficult. A girl with gentle but intense brown eyes protested quietly that Dante had surely not meant that the system was so absolute as to last forever. There must come a day, she said, when the Hell would be dissolved and its inhabitants forgiven. Elliott could not allow that this was true in the poem, but he expressed his understanding gently. The girl finished the seminar with everyone else, but after that she left Syracuse and was said to have sold her typewriter, cut her hair, and gone to work with the poor in Appalachia. Later she returned to the university, and there may have been a special appropriateness to the fact that she, along with another poet, won the first informal literary prize established in Elliott's name after he died.

Elliott read widely in foreign literature and at times made the specialized effort of translation. Late in his career, when I knew him, he did not read the original Italian of the *Divine Comedy* but recalled a time when he could. With his daughter he translated Balzac's *The Vicar of Tours* and included the translation in his anthology *Types of Prose Fiction*. He directed two graduate students in their study of Rilke, requiring them to complete their own translations of certain passages by using a dictionary, some reference to other sources, and their own sense of Rilke's intentions. Elliott was inclined by nature to love words, but he also loved them because language was the means for communication through literature, both within one culture and, through translation, among readers of other languages. His understanding of human nature and his sense of shades of meaning in words were well employed in translating. He once reported that, while on a trip to Russia with his wife, Mary Emma, he had tried to communicate to an old woman at a shoeshine stand that he would like to have his shoes polished. Not knowing any Russian, he apparently tried to speak in gestures, but to no avail. He told the story in a tone that was partly amazed, but it seemed that, for Elliott, words were simply essential.

He believed that language well equipped a person to convey the most complex impressions or ideas, and he tended his own language carefully. Though his writing admitted such poetic neopropisms as *disappear* as a transitive verb (she disappeared him) and such unusual terms as *decalcomania*, his vocabulary was extensive in both the high and the low and especially broad in the middle, with an authority that rivaled an unabridged dictionary. One afternoon, during a reading by a writer then on the Syracuse faculty, Elliott was seated in the front row among the spectators. During the reading, the writer stumbled on a word and immediately looked up to catch Elliott's eye. With a kind of bemused confidence, he asked Elliott how the word was pronounced. Elliott asked what the word was, a comment that brought laughter from the audience. The writer spelled the word, and Elliott instantly and clearly responded, "es*chew*." The reading then continued agreeably. It is interesting to speculate about whether the question would have been asked if Elliott had not been in the audience. His presence alone seemed to maintain respect for language.

On another occasion, a graduate student in the Dante seminar mispronounced *Charon* during his report on Greek mythology. The student read on from his notes, but Elliott interrupted and asked the student to repeat what he had said for the ferryman's name. The student smiled, as if he were about to expose one of Elliott's bookish eccentricities. Elliott just listened attentively as the student said again, "Sharon." "The letters *ch* are pronounced like a *k* when a Greek word is said in English," Elliott said. "You should know that." The student shrugged and nodded, and he continued his presentation as before. But it was clear that his error, and the effect it had on Elliott, took some time to dissipate from the room.

Elliott's respect for individual experience and his appreciation of the natural vigor and variety in life led him to reject as inadequate any system that claimed to explain experience neatly. Rather than provide a system of belief to his students, he chose to concentrate on the intricacies of individual works. With a unifying sense of shared experience, he welcomed variety and difference. His graduate course Modes of Fiction was a popular and much admired class that was always filled. It would



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be difficult to find a theme in the works he specified for reading, except to say they were all interesting. The works included Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*; *Don Quixote*; Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* (Book I); Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*; *The Brothers Karamazov*; Kleist's stories "The Marquise of O" and "Michael Kohlhaas"; Chekhov's "Ward 6," "The Duel," "In the Ravine," "My Life," and "Gusev"; Georges Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*; and Kafka's *The Castle*. The course required a great deal of reading, but the rewards—the understanding and pleasure—were great. I still believe the reading list for his course makes up a program guaranteed to inspire gratitude for variety of idea and method and to exhibit the natural vitality of literature.

For Elliott's own anthology, *Types of Prose Fiction*, he used narrative categories defined by Northrop Frye in the fourth essay of *An Anatomy of Criticism*. Elliott avoided the rest of Frye's system of interpretation and used the categories of romance, autobiography, anatomy, and realistic novel for their value in "expanding a reader's appreciation of the manifold possibilities of fiction to make it harder for him to demand that a story conform to a limited theory and easier for him to enjoy and talk about what a given story has done." The anthology, which includes novella-length stories by Diderot, Kleist, Chekhov, Faulkner, and Bellow, is proof of the pleasures in variety that Elliott so esteemed. His singular ability to accommodate differences was founded on his faith in the naturalness and simplicity of the storyteller's impulse in all times and cultures, qualities admirably set down in the words he excerpted from Lady Murasaki for his essay "A Defense of Fiction":

> Again and again something in his own life or in that around him will seem to the writer so important that he cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, he feels, when men do not know about it.

Early in my acquaintance with Elliott, I learned that his friend and colleague Donald Dike had died of cancer. When I went with many others to the university chapel for the memorial service, Elliott was sitting on a folding chair at the front of the chapel wearing a professor's ceremonial robe and waiting for the service to begin. He sat perfectly still, with his head thrown back slightly. When he came to the podium, he spoke in the same voice I was accustomed to hearing in the classroom. He told a few familiar anecdotes about his friend and drew laughter from the audience. Then he read, clearly and carefully, the Dylan Thomas poem "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower," which was, he said gently, "one of Don's favorites." It was only later, reading the poem for myself, that I appreciated how difficult it must have been for him to read the poem for his friend:

> The lips of time leech to the fountain head:
> Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
> Shall calm her sores.
> And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
> How time has ticked a heaven round the
> stars.

In this perfect balancing of professor of literature and man, George Elliott was a marvel in himself. Rather than learn what he had to teach, the challenge seemed rather to know him.

In "A Defense of Fiction," Elliott wrote that the realistic writer's "best job is to arouse and extend our wonder at the endless variety of human possibilities in the actual social, psychological, and moral world, and to enlarge our sense of communion with one another: *If life is like that, I am not alone.*" He was, in his novels and stories, just that kind of realistic writer. One of the delightful qualities of his fiction is that, although he spent most of his adult life teaching on university faculties, his stories do not concern university life. He was interested in what might be called the natural ironies and complexities of life, those that involved the most important relationships of man to himself, man to family, man to country, and man to maker. It seemed that the ironic and often amusingly self-critical concerns of the subculture of the university, where he himself invested so much energy, were to him secondary. He was a man who took his ideas and his pleasures seriously, and he had no time for matters that distracted him from his immediate interests.

His unflinching moral seriousness was important in his work. The central character of *In the World*, who as a university law professor is a rare exception to the non-university occupations in most of Elliott's stories, is a



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firm and enlightened libertarian with strong ideas about the social contract. Far from being morally rigid, the professor offers great enjoyment as he ponders the subtleties of his work, his family life, and an affair. He is engaging throughout, but his consistent actions sometimes seem somewhat labored. Himself a hater of television, he makes the gesture of allowing his daughter to possess a TV and to watch it, and he even (the daughter's boyfriend is amazed, being his student) joins her now and then to take in a show. This occasion to watch TV is a part of the charm of the work (one that is not a masterpiece) rather than a weakness.

Elliott was a contemporary man of letters, publishing novels, stories, poems, essays, and anthologies. The subtlety of his understanding and the sophistication of his delight in life give a unifying theme to his work, which is otherwise extremely various. His novels and stories ought to be better known and more available, but it is his essays that make up his finest contribution to letters. Growing up on a farm in the southern California desert, an impressionable boy with a natural love of inquiry and order and a justified respect for his Quaker father, who was, nevertheless, possessed of some impurifying superstitions, George Elliott was at a very young age the kind of lover of life he later fully became. By both circumstances and the personal pressure of his nature, he was drawn early to literature and from then on found it essential to his broader thinking about life. The mixture of the personal with the literary and of the actual with the abstract characterizes his many essays and gives them a fine power.

Elliott's many splendid essays include "The Sky and a Goat," "Getting Away from the Chickens," "Never *Nothing*," "Science and the Profession of Literature," and "Critic and Common Reader." "Snarls of Beauty," a lecture and essay not yet collected, may be in subject and execution the finest of his remarkable essays. In the essay Elliott moves effortlessly from episodes in his own experience to the all-night banquet of *The Symposium* and back again. The wonder of the essay is in this evolution of his experience of beauty, a power that had always drawn him but which a certain fastidiousness had led him to leave alone. When he set out to convey his appreciation of beauty, a subject on which both of his Protestant parents were by nature skittish, he was attempting something he had not done before and revealing, in a way all of his own, the love of life that was behind his inquiry.

Elliott's commentary on *The Symposium* in "Snarls of Beauty" helps convey his own respect and gratitude for the essential complications of experience:

> Plato does not make things neat, but neither does he ensnarl us in complication. Socrates is ugly and he has gods in him, Alcibiades is a reprobate and he is beautiful.

The complementary powers of beauty and wisdom drew Elliott and were, for him, wonders to be protected from rigid dogmatism. It is not surprising that his final goal in "Snarls of Beauty" is to protect the mystery of how beauty draws him, not to diminish its essential power by imposing on that power an unnatural syllogism that implies the response is logical. To Elliott, the response to beauty, as to wisdom, is natural, various, surprising, essential to joy in life, and finally inviolable. The last line of the essay, in evoking his distrust of rigidly logical systems, reflects a unifying idea in the whole body of his work: "Not *therefore*: *and*."

Elliott's essays accomplish what his teaching did—they inspire wonder for life; they are fun to read; they open up experience, literary and otherwise, to the person who reads them; they show an accommodating and judicious spirit that combines thought with pleasure. They are literary, but they are not only about literature. Works of life, not analysis, the essays are never finished but can be read many times with pleasure; it never limits enjoyment to know the ending, because the pleasure is in getting there.

The unscholarly love of literature in Elliott's nature was an essential element of his work and teaching throughout his long career. His personal sense of the powers of literature are conveyed at the end of "Critic and Common Reader":

> Lovers are poets, and experience of literature is something like love: it quickens its lover to intense life, it is not everlasting, but at the time it is of eternity, it is incalculably precious, its power is measured both by its delight and its anguish, it is there for all who want it, each makes it himself. It is everybody's language shaped with love.

From Elliott's essays, stories, and novels I learned about determinism, the desert, Ezra Pound, the social contract, and carob trees.



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From his teaching I learned not to speak out of ignorance, to esteem my experience of literature, and to trust the power of that experience in a larger life. He was an unscholarly professor and a conscientious artist, and he showed in this balancing that the profession of literature could be coherent and honorable.

When George Elliott died suddenly in 1980, just as he began his retirement from teaching, I remembered a night after the Dante seminar when I saw him set off alone across the dark green, wearing his winter hat and carrying a box of typing paper under one arm. He walked with the same measured but eager pace I had noticed in the English department hallways. It is a matter of deep regret that he did not enjoy a long and prolific retirement. The enduring source of gratitude is that he devoted so much of his life and his prodigious energies to readers, to literature, to teaching.

# *Remembering*

KELLY CHERRY

In the ruining garden,
In the closed house,
In the dwindling light
And rain, always rain,
I think of you again
And the grass sweetens,
The house brightens
Night wraps itself around
My shoulders, a shawl
As full of darkness as the fall
But warm and dry,
And stars appear
In the sky like burning kisses
Blown by the solar wind—
Here, from a time out of mind.

✪ KELLY CHERRY is the author of *Natural Theology*. Her work has appeared most recently in *Atlantic*, *Commentary*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*.



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# *MUSIC*

## Elegy for the Woodchopper

TERRY TEACHOUT

LeMars, Iowa, a small farm town about thirty miles north of Sioux City, is jumping tonight. It is Founder's Day at Westmar College, a local United Methodist school with an enrollment of 430, and the college is throwing a Saturday night dinner dance in honor of the occasion. The picked-over remnants of a hundred platefuls of prime rib have been cleared away. Fifteen men are settling themselves on a folding bandstand, leafing through thick folders of music and idly tuning up their instruments. Most of them are in their twenties and early thirties. Their leader, who is waiting for his cue in the hall outside the dining room, is seventy-four.

The drummer strikes a crisp roll on his tom-toms, the trombonists wave plastic mutes in front of their golden bells, and Woody Herman's Thundering Herd swells confidently into the slow, mournful strains of "Blue Flame," Herman's theme song since 1941. The odds are good that I am the only person in the room under the age of fifty who recognizes it. I own two recordings of "Blue Flame." I have heard the Thundering Herd play it in an Independence, Missouri, shopping center, in the auditorium of a suburban high school, and on a warm summer night at an outdoor concert in Kansas City. I have traveled a thousand miles to hear it tonight.

Without further ado, a short, stooped, balding man quietly steps from the wings and begins to make his slow and careful way to the bandstand. He does not smile. He is too tired to smile. I saw him backstage before the dance, bent almost double under the weight of a half century of one-night stands. Every wrinkle on his deeply lined face seemed to stand for another year of bumpy bus rides and cheap motels.

Forty years ago, Woody Herman was a matinee idol who packed movie theaters and ballrooms from coast to coast. He had his own network radio show. His records were jukebox hits. But that was before the long, sad slump that killed off the big bands and replaced them with the insipid popular singers of the fifties and the long-haired rock stars of the sixties. The crowds are smaller now, the ballrooms less glamorous, the drives from job to job longer.

LeMars is the Thundering Herd's fourth gig this week, and it seems impossible that Herman will be able to shake off his obvious exhaustion and face the three hours of hard work that lie before him. But the throaty, growling sounds of "Blue Flame" are working their nightly miracle, and Woody Herman seems to grow more confident with each cautious step. As the room swells with the heartfelt applause of expectant dancers, the last of the big band leaders finally reaches center stage, picks up his clarinet, and begins to play the blues.

The word *no*, judiciously spoken, can move mountains, shatter faiths, uproot the destined course of a lifetime. I like to think, although I've never asked him about it, that my father had this in mind when he told me not to touch the old phonograph records in the basement closet. Whatever his intentions, the fact remains that as soon as the back door slammed behind him that Sunday afternoon, I was halfway downstairs. By the time he was out of the garage, I had removed the roll-away bed

✪ TERRY TEACHOUT is a member of the editorial board of the *New York Daily News*. He is the editor of *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers, 1931–1959*, to be published this summer by Regnery Gateway.



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from the closet and dragged six crumbling cardboard boxes out from behind it.

Had those boxes been full of the complete recorded works of, say, Shep Fields and His Rippling Rhythm, I would have shoved them back behind the roll-away bed without a second thought. But my father had been young once, and the music that he favored in his youth was, by and large, the swinging kind. To be sure, he loved the music of Glenn Miller, which is perfect for dancing but a little dumpy in the rhythm section and not, on the whole, quite the thing to speed up the pulse of a young boy raised on the Rolling Stones. But my father had a roving ear, and along with his battered copies of "Moonlight Serenade" and "Perfidia" and "American Patrol," he had preserved several dozen records by Artie Shaw and Stan Kenton and Tommy Dorsey and Claude Thornhill—and Woody Herman.

After he came home from the war, my father bought many of the records that Woody Herman made in 1945 and 1946 with the band that would later become known as the First Herd: "Apple Honey," "The Good Earth," "Your Father's Mustache," "Caldonia." Once he had danced to them with my mother. Now I held them in my hands, those red-label Columbias, thickly covered with cardboard shavings, unplayed for twenty years and more. I took them over to the basement phonograph, a cast-off Philco portable. I had just read *The Good Earth*, and so I put on "The Good Earth" first, wondering what this dusty artifact could possibly have to do with Pearl Buck's slow-moving tale of life among the rice paddies. Curious and mildly expectant, I changed the speed of the turntable from thirty-three to seventy-eight, flipped the needle over, and eased the heavy tone arm onto the record.

Children born in the age of the laser-scanned compact disc will never know the sound of a steel needle briskly scratching its way through the grooves of a shellac seventy-eight, a sound as evocative for the jazz buff as the tuning up of a symphony orchestra is for the lover of classical music. I heard it for the first time that afternoon. Then strange music came crashing out of the speakers, the loud, piercing, joyous strains of a big band in full cry. I heard it plain, unfiltered by nostalgia, unobscured by memories of make-believe ballrooms and the girl you left behind. I turned up the volume as far as it would go, feeling the lift of the smooth, inexorable rhythms in my bones. I was hooked. The big band era, long after its demise, had reached down the corridors of lost time and grabbed a piece of me in the year 1968.

I borrowed a bass from the music room of my junior high school on the first day of summer, carried it home, and played along with my father's records until school started again in the fall. I played every record in the house a hundred times and memorized all five of the books about the big band era in the local public library. One of the musicians I learned about that summer was Woody Herman. He, too, had been a young man, twenty-three-years old, when he stepped in front of his first big band at Brooklyn's Roseland Ballroom on November 3, 1936. Eleven years later, he was leading one of the most successful bands in America. The dancers loved Herman's Herd, and the musicianship of the group was so highly regarded by pros that Igor Stravinsky himself composed a piece, *Ebony Concerto*, especially for Herman and his men. "Their instrumental mastery," Stravinsky would write years later, "was astonishing."

I learned that Herman doubled on clarinet and alto saxophone; that he had survived every change in musical fashion, even the ruthless chokehold of rock; that he was still spending ten months out of the year on the road with his current group, which he now called the Thundering Herd. ("There were so many Herds," Herman once explained, "that I lost count.") Hundreds of musicians, among them Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, Red Norvo, and Dave Tough, passed through Woody Herman's bands, which acquired a reputation as one of the great finishing schools of jazz. None of his alumni, I read, ever had a bad word to say about him.

I wanted it to be 1945 again, so that I could play bass with Woody Herman. Instead, I went off to college in Kansas City, where I wangled a part-time job reviewing jazz for the local newspaper. I joined the local chapter of the American Federation of Musicians and began playing bass around town. By the time I came to New York some ten years later, I had learned a lot more about jazz—and about myself. I had played enough lousy gigs to know that I didn't have the true fire in my belly, that I didn't want to play jazz badly enough to do nothing else.

There was only one thing that I had not



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done: I had never gone out on the road. But a couple of choir tours in college had given me a taste, albeit a sanitary one, of what it feels like to live out of a suitcase and play for a different audience every night. A dozen autobiographies had taught me at second hand the miseries of life on the road: broken-down buses charging across rickety bridges, greasy food and crummy pianos and hostile crowds. Charlie Barnet's pithy description of the road, once read, was impossible to forget: "You stay tired, dirty and drunk." I had no desire to do any of those things. Newly married and ambitious and more than a little bit priggish, I put my bass in the closet, quit the union, and got myself a real job.

One bright December morning, I put my feet up on a desk in an assistant editor's cubicle in lower Manhattan, started sifting through the daily pile of unread magazines, and stumbled across a short article about Woody Herman that mentioned in passing that he was preparing to celebrate his fiftieth anniversary as a bandleader with a concert at the Hollywood Bowl. I didn't even stop to think twice. I called up a friendly colleague at another magazine and started talking very fast. How about a profile of Woody Herman? Good guy, everybody loves him, fiftieth anniversary, last of the great big band leaders. I could even spend, oh, a couple of days traveling with the band.

My friend, who knew nothing of jazz and everything of the great unwashed public, heard a classic human-interest story in the making, which was precisely what I meant for him to hear. But I heard something else. Throwing dignity to the winds, I begged him to buy the story. And he did.

It is four minutes after noon. I am standing in the parking lot of a run-down motel on the outskirts of LeMars. Those who eat breakfast have long since boarded the band bus. A handful of stragglers, some of whom have all too clearly just stumbled out of bed, are scrambling on board for the long haul to Kansas City, where the Thundering Herd has a night off. Woody Herman has already left for the Sioux City airport. Too fragile to endure the day-to-day stresses of life on the bus, he will fly to the next gig. No one resents his absence. He paid his dues long before most of the musicians in the band were born.

"This is home, man," one musician says to me as we climb on board. If that is so, then the Thundering Herd is in desperate need of a housekeeper. The back of the bus, where the rowdier Herdsmen like to sit, is littered with books, pillows, and old newspapers from various cities. A huge double bass, snugly wrapped in its black canvas case, is balanced gingerly in the seat ahead of me. The overhead luggage racks are crammed with suitcases and overnight bags of every imaginable size and color. A hand-lettered sign hangs on the door of the toilet: "Contamination! Hazardous waste may be harmful to your health."

The door of the bus hisses shut and the driver pulls out of the parking lot. As the cornfields of southwestern Iowa slip by unnoticed, the players swap battered paperbacks, play Trivial Pursuit, and trade notes on the restaurants of LeMars. They eat virtually all of their meals in restaurants, and they take their feeding seriously. A cassette of the band's next album for Concord Jazz, recorded three weeks ago at a concert in San Francisco, makes its snail-like way from seat to seat. One man is banging away at a pocket calculator, working feverishly on his tax return.

I have brought along a homemade cassette tape of the First Herd's recordings from the forties. To my surprise, I discover that most of the people sitting around me have never heard any of Herman's early records. My interest in them strikes the tenor saxophonist in the seat across the aisle as somewhat peculiar, a mark of squareness. Why should he care about Woody Herman's old stuff? *He* plays with Woody every night. But the musicians are curious, and my cassette is soon being passed through the bus along with the rough mix of the next Herman album. "Goddamn, man, that stuff holds up *really well*," the tenor saxophonist says to me, shaking his head in amazement as Woody Herman's 1945 trumpet section wails its way through the last chorus of "Northwest Passage."

Sitting just behind me is Mark Lewis, a slender, boyish-looking trumpeter who has played with the Thundering Herd since 1980. Cappy Lewis, his father, played with the Herman band more than forty years ago. (He plays the muted trumpet solo on Herman's 1946 recording of "Woodchopper's Ball," one of the tunes on my homemade cassette.) "Dad took me to hear the band one night," he tells



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me. "We went up to meet Woody afterwards, and when Dad told him that I played trumpet, Woody said, 'So when are you going to play in my band?'"

It wasn't that simple, for Mark wasn't sure he wanted to lead the life of an itinerant musician. "The road," he says, "is the same thing every day. You don't have much time to yourself. You eat bad food a lot of the time. You're stuck on a bus eight hours a day. You wash your underwear in the sink. When you get sick, there's nothing you can do but ride the bus and play the gigs and feel rotten all the time." Many players, Mark tells me, prefer the lucrative, stay-at-home life of a studio musician, living in Los Angeles or New York and playing background music for movies, TV commercials, or pop recordings.

In the end, Mark Lewis chose to follow his father's path and give the Thundering Herd a try. "There's a freshness to our work," he explains, "that makes it worthwhile, especially when we get a young, enthusiastic crowd. That's what we look forward to. Their excitement makes us *want* to play." And, of course, there is Woody Herman, the most popular boss in the big band business. "He lets you be yourself. He keeps things relaxed. You're never afraid to go up on the bandstand with Woody. And he really loves to hear us play. That's why he's there."

Six hours after leaving LeMars, as the skyline of Kansas City begins to loom in the windows of the bus, the band members begin to discuss their plans for the evening. A rumor that a convention of beauticians is being held in our hotel ripples through the back of the bus. One group of Herdsmen wants to go out looking for some real Kansas City barbecue. All the musicians with wives or girlfriends at home decide to get together and watch a little television. A quick look through *USA Today* reveals that an Andy Griffith reunion movie will be showing on CBS tonight. "Eight o'clock call, guys," says trumpeter Bill Byrne, Herman's road manager, as the bus finally pulls into the Downtown Howard Johnson parking lot. A chorus of groans greets his announcement as the Thundering Herd streams off the bus and heads for the front desk in search of room keys.

I leave the bus by myself. I chose this particular weekend to travel with the Herman band because I knew it would be passing through Kansas City, and I have been looking forward to spending a quiet night in my old college town. Italian Gardens, a familiar downtown haunt where I had intended to give myself a good dinner, turns out to be closed on Sundays, and so I trudge back to the restaurant of the Howard Johnson for lack of a better idea. As I chew on a stubborn piece of hotel steak, the words of "Sweet Kentucky Ham," a song by jazz pianist Dave Frishberg, flash into my mind, and I realize for the first time that Frishberg, an old road rat from way back, wasn't trying to be funny:

> *It's six p.m.,*
> *Suppertime in South Bend, Indiana,*
> *And you figure, what the hell,*
> *You can eat in your motel,*
> *So you order up room service on the phone,*
> *Watch the local news and dine alone.*
> *You've got to take what little pleasures*
> *you can find—*
> *But you've got sweet Kentucky ham on your*
> *mind.*

At eight A.M., the same musicians who barely made it onto the bus in LeMars are barely making it onto the bus in Kansas City. The rumor about the beauticians' convention was true. As they stagger aboard, the married men quiz them closely about what else was going on last night besides "Return to Mayberry." Ostensibly precise details are exchanged as we pull onto the highway and start our long drive across the prairies of Kansas to El Dorado, an oil town of thirteen thousand where Butler County Community College is hosting an afternoon clinic and an evening concert. The clinic is for the members of the college jazz band and other student musicians from the area, while the concert is open to the general public.

The afternoon clinic begins with a short performance by the Thundering Herd. About forty students, trumpets and trombones and saxophones in their laps, are scattered around the bleachers of the college gym. Many of them look skeptical. I eavesdrop and learn that a few of them have never even heard of Woody Herman. Herman knows this, too, which is why he always starts off his clinics with a few numbers by the full band. He takes his job as a jazz educator with the utmost seriousness, and he has always kept one ear open to the latest sounds. (The book of the



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current Thundering Herd contains selections by Chick Corea, Steps Ahead, Steely Dan, and the Miami Sound Machine.) But he also knows that there is only one way to make hot young guns pay attention: by being hotter than they are.

Dressed in a windbreaker and sneakers, Herman makes his slow way to center stage and offers a few terse words of greeting. The first tune, he says, will be a new arrangement of Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing." (How many of these rock-besotted kids, I wonder, know who Duke Ellington was?) The rhythm section pumps out a fast four-bar introduction. The saxophones enter with the theme and the brass reply with a crisp riff. A massive wave of sound rolls off the bandstand and washes over the bleachers. I can see that the students are surprised at how *loud* the Thundering Herd is. But it is a special kind of loudness, a kind they have never encountered before. It comes not from tall banks of shrieking amplifiers but from sixteen jazz musicians playing in bold, fat-toned unison, and it quickly sets their feet to tapping.

After the concert, the members of the band retire to separate classrooms to explain a few of the tricks of the musician's trade. Meanwhile, Woody Herman heads for the men's locker room, where a table loaded with cold cuts and soft drinks awaits the band. I have arranged to spend the next hour with him. He pours himself a glass of orange juice while I fiddle with my tape recorder. I ask him about some of his less well known alumni from the forties and fifties. This is a gesture of homage, a sign that I have taken the trouble to learn about him, that I am a member of the fraternity of jazzmen, a respectful insider. The friendly mask and the polite, unreflective answers of a hundred hurried interviews with small-town newspaper reporters are promptly laid aside. In his soft, buzzy voice, Herman begins to tell me ornate tales of epileptic drummers and heroin-soaked baritone sax players and hard times on the road. "The highways are better now," he assures me with an ironic smile, "so you get to drive even farther every day."

The door opens and two nervous-looking students walk in. They are reporters from the Butler County Community College paper and they have been assigned to do a story about Woody Herman for this week's edition. It is clear to me after the first couple of questions that they have only the vaguest idea of who Herman is. I become angry for a moment, but his kindness shames me. Instead of lecturing the kid reporters, I prompt them with softball questions which Herman knocks back gracefully.

The bell rings and the two reporters, who have to go to a class, leave us alone again. The lost rhythm of our talk is quickly recaptured. Why, I ask, are you still on the road after fifty years? "There's a reason for the road," Herman tells me. "As long as you're doing one-nighters and moving every day, you have the most freedom for your music. You don't have to answer to the people you worked for yesterday. You're not going to be there tomorrow night. You can play the music *you* want to play. That's why I keep going. Because it's still fun. That's the reason I'm here, and that's why all the guys are here. Sure, they gripe like hell. They go through all the motions of being unhappy people. But then they start playing, and they realize that this is the only thing they want to do. I know I can't think of anything else *I* want to do."

There is a pause. Herman is clearly eager to get back to his motel room and rest. I start to stumble over my words. Up to this moment, I have been prompting him with ease, but the thing I want to tell him most now will not come out. *My God, Mr. Herman*, I want to say, *I admire you so much. You can't imagine how hard I schemed to get to where I could sit in this dirty locker room and watch you drink lukewarm orange juice. I called my father last night to tell him about this trip. He used to drive for eight straight hours to come hear me play in Kansas City. He was so proud of me, Mr. Herman, and you did that, you and Stan Kenton and Artie Shaw and Claude Thornhill.*

"Mr. Herman," I say nervously, "do you ever play 'The Good Earth' anymore?"

He shakes his head. "Nope." He rises slowly to his feet. "But I'll see if I can work it in tonight."

That evening the band returns to the gym for a full-length concert. The crowd of five hundred is a mixture of middle-aged couples and younger fans, including most of the students who came to the clinic that afternoon. Herman offers them his standard concert program. There are five numbers from the books of the First and Second Herds: "Blue Flame," "Woodchopper's Ball," "Four Brothers,"



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"I've Got the World on a String," and "Early Autumn." There is a rock version of Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" and a jazz version of Gabriel Fauré's "Pavane." There are a half-dozen numbers from the Thundering Herd's forthcoming album. The band plays them so beautifully and passionately that even the older members of the audience, the ones who came to touch up their fading memories, give in happily to the new sounds.

Herman announces that he will play an old First Herd tune by special request. The players fumble frantically through their music. Then he kicks off "The Good Earth." The tempo he sets is a little too fast for comfort. The professional's ear is never completely off duty, and I note with dismay the raggedness of the performance. I know sight-reading when I hear it, and I know it is unlikely that very many of these young players have even heard the tune before, unless they happened to listen to my cassette during the drive from LeMars to Kansas City. But it is with my forgiving inner ear that I hear Neal Hefti's chart the way it sounded in a New York recording studio on August 10, 1945, at the beginning of the atomic age and the end of the big band era. I hear Dave Tough's flashing cymbals, Flip Phillips's surging tenor saxophone, Pete Candoli's brazen, slightly acid lead trumpet, Chubby Jackson's springy five-string bass lines. I wonder if Woody Herman can hear them too.

Nine Herdsmen hang around the gym after the concert to play basketball. The others, too beat to join in, board the bus and return to the motel. I am among them. "Back in the old days," one trumpeter says to me in the lobby, "jazz musicians used to shoot heroin. Now we shoot baskets. Wild life, isn't it?"

As I flew back to New York the next day, I reflected on the fate of aging performers who decline to retire. For some, it is an addiction: they cannot get up in the morning without the certain knowledge that they will hear applause before they go to bed at night. I don't doubt that Woody Herman liked applause, but that wasn't why he stayed on the road. I knew, although I didn't ask him about it in the locker room of Butler County Community College, that he continued to tour because he owed the government money.

Back in the sixties, Herman's manager, a fat man named Abe Turchen who couldn't stay away from bookies, spent three straight years gambling away the money for Herman's income tax and the band's withholding. By the time anyone knew what was going on, Herman owed the Internal Revenue Service $1.6 million in back taxes, penalties, and interest. For the rest of his life, all of Herman's profits and all of his record royalties went directly to the IRS. That was why he kept touring. His options were limited: he could exchange one prison for another.

As the seventies gave way to the eighties, Woody Herman's situation started to deteriorate. Charlotte, his beloved wife, died of breast cancer. Old age started to catch up with him, and his clarinet playing grew shrill and uncertain. He scaled back his solos to the barest possible minimum. From time to time, a critic would knock him in print, leaving a foaming wake of hatred among musicians who, reading the cold, tactless words, cursed the critics, cursed the IRS, cursed the idiot fate that saddled Woody with a merciless financial burden and simultaneously took away his health.

The sense of mortality that hung over the Thundering Herd during the last few years of Woody Herman's life was palpable. It didn't keep the members of the band from swinging hard every night, but they could never forget about it, especially as Herman's contemporaries began, one by one, to die or retire. "It doesn't seem strange to me now," Mark Lewis told me. "What'll really feel strange is when the band goes. I'm thirty-one years old. I started listening to big bands when I was thirteen. All the old guys were still going strong then, guys like Ellington, Basie, Stan Kenton. Now it's down to Woody. Believe me, there'll be an empty feeling when Woody quits."

He didn't quit. In fact, he stayed on the road for several months after I returned to New York, during the course of which I tried to write my magazine piece. My first draft was bounced back. *Not enough details*, the editor said. I knew what kind of details he meant, and I didn't want to put them in. I knew that this story would not have a happy ending.

The fiftieth-anniversary concert came and went, and I kept tinkering with my piece. Then Woody got really sick, sick enough for the New York papers to take notice of his plight. Unable to travel anymore, he returned



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to Hollywood. When the money stopped coming in, the IRS seized his house and put it on the block. A real estate speculator bought it for a song and offered to rent it back to Woody. When he couldn't make the payments, the speculator served him with an eviction notice. For the first time in his life, Woody Herman found himself on the evening news. A band of loyal Herman alumni (there was no other kind) held a benefit concert to pay their old leader's rent. He was too far gone to know or care. My editor called me up. "I think that circumstances may have caught up with your piece," he said.

Woody Herman died on November 26, 1987. I was sitting in my office when the news came over the wires. As I read the bare words of the bulletin, I thought of a scene from my first night on the road with the Thundering Herd. It was 12:40 in the morning. The dancers were gone, the albums sold, the autographs signed. The pianist and bassist were jamming together on "Willow Weep for Me" as the other musicians, tired and bedraggled from another long night's work, knocked down the music stands and took apart their instruments. Woody was standing alone near the bandstand, listening to the music, idly snapping his fingers to the beat. He picked up his clarinet and tossed off a low, breathy chorus of "Willow Weep for Me." Then he put it down, did a stiff little dance step, and slipped out of the room without a word. Homeless and wifeless and futureless, Woody Herman was still taking what little pleasures he could find. His music had sustained him for five decades, and it would comfort him until the very end.

I recalled my own youthful dream of playing bass with the Thundering Herd. Could I have cut it? Now I would never know. I thought about what I had missed by having been born a couple of decades too late, by having chosen instead a loving wife and a middle-class job. I struck a balance in my mind for the ten thousandth time and noted once again that the life I had chosen came out squarely in the black. I said a silent farewell to Woody Herman and remembered, not without a touch of rue, the last verse of "Sweet Kentucky Ham":

*It's one a.m.*
*They're serving up last call in Cincinnati.*
*But it's still a nighttime town*
*If you know your way around.*
*And despite yourself, you find you're wide awake.*
*You're staring at your scrambled eggs and steak.*
*You must admit your heart's about to break*
*When you think of what you left behind—*
*And you've got sweet Kentucky ham on your mind, on your mind,*
*Nothing but sweet Kentucky ham on your mind.*



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*REAPPRAISAL*

# In Pursuit of Cocteau

RENEE WINEGARTEN

*In general a purely poetical subject is as superior to a political one as the pure everlasting truth of nature is to party spirit.*
—Goethe, May 4, 1827, quoted in Eckermann, *Conversations*

What to do about Jean Cocteau? What to do about the critical dilemma of the respective claims of art and politics posed by his life and his work? These questions are renewed by the publication of his diaries for 1951–53 (a belated attempt to emulate Gide's), and of his letters to his friend and onetime companion, the actor Jean Marais (*Le Passé Défini*, vols. 1 and 2, Gallimard; *Lettres à Jean Marais*, Albin Michel). It is surely time to reconsider Cocteau's position: last year marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death in October 1963; and the centenary of his birth, at Maisons-Laffitte in the environs of Paris, falls in July 1989.

Inextricably caught up in the jazzy twenties—a decade that he later came to regard as "the shirt of Nessus" from which he himself (and his reputation) could never win free—he was in many ways a product of aesthetic attitudes current during his boyhood and youth at the turn of the century, attitudes that endured at least up to 1939. All the same, he stood in the forefront of many of the innovatory tendencies that flourished in literature, music, and painting before and after the 1914–18 war. Either Cocteau was putting them into practice in his own work, often before anyone else, or he was lauding and advocating those introduced by others. Poet, critic, novelist, librettist (for ballet, opera, and oratorio), dramatist, stage designer (of sets and costumes), actor on occasion, scriptwriter, filmmaker, caricaturist, illustrator, painter, designer of tapestries and pottery—Jean Cocteau is, for many, altogether too much.

Add to all this the fact that, when young, Cocteau was presented to the Empress Eugénie, widow of Napoleon III, and that he first came before the public at eighteen as a protégé of the homosexual actor, Édouard de Max, the friend of Oscar Wilde. Here is Cocteau dining with Proust, and there he is collaborating with Stravinsky and Picasso (both of whom he puffed). Nor should one forget the luminaries of fashion, stage, and screen with whom he associated throughout his life. The index of any biography of Cocteau reads like a twentieth-century *Who's Who*.

Yet it has to be admitted that after perusing biographical accounts of this famed magician, conjurer, acrobat, whether they be sympathetic to him or denigratory, the reader scarcely feels any nearer to the heart of the subject. Denigrators—and Cocteau has never lacked for them—would say that there is no heart or unifying core in the flutterings of this butterfly. He assisted opponents by declaring notoriously in a prose poem his sense of being a leper, a zero: "My blood has turned to ink. . . . I have stolen his papers from a certain J. C. born at M. L. (Maisons-Laffitte) on . . . , dead at eighteen after a brilliant poetic career. . . . Let them shut me up, lynch me. Understand who may: *I am a lie who always tells the truth*" (his italics). What precisely does that oft-quoted admission mean? Surely it does not signify that he is a liar (though he

✪ RENEE WINEGARTEN, essayist and literary critic, is the author of *Writers and Revolution, The Double Life of George Sand: Woman and Writer, Mme de Staël*, and *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical View*.



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liked to embroider the truth), but a fictionist. And is it not the actor's role, as well as the poet's, to "lie" for what he likes to consider "a higher truth"? We readily acquiesce, for our delight or illumination.

The lack of a convincing sense of identity may characterize poet, dramatist, and actor. Keats felt this when speaking of himself, the great Shakespearian actor Edmund Kean, Shakespeare, and "negative capability." The ability to share—like Keats—in the existence of another creature, the bird that picks about the gravel, is one of the actor's talents also. With Cocteau, this is taken a step further in the idea that he has assumed the identity of another, that he is impersonating someone called Jean Cocteau (a notion encapsulated in his well-known words: "Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo"). Cocteau's story *Thomas l'Imposteur*, based on his own brief and idiosyncratic wartime career on the fringes of the conflict, traces the adventures of an obscure young man who, during the 1914–18 war, adopts the persona of General de Fontenoy's nephew. In keeping with the family military tradition, he volunteers to carry a message, and is gunned down by an enemy patrol: " 'A bullet,' he said to himself. *'I am lost if I do not pretend to be dead'* " (the novelist's italics). So in the performance of his role, the youth remains consistent to the last.

What certainly functions throughout Cocteau's work, alongside the numerous legends fostered by himself, and by others associated with the overexposed "frivolous prince," is a formidable industriousness together with a devout sense of discipline and order in art, if not in life. That high tone of devotion to art, reminiscent of Baudelaire or Flaubert, remains constant in his writings. Cocteau would later speak of his fidelity to his own path or personal line, along which he was directed by his unconscious. He began to write before the Marxian-style theory that everything is governed by politics and economics had taken hold. The artist's prime concern was beauty. As early as 1817 Keats had observed that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration," though this was not his last word on the subject. The idea of "pure poetry" was in the air in France between the wars. Abbé Henri Bremond, profoundly influenced by A. C. Bradley's Oxford lectures *Poetry for Poetry's Sake*, upheld the notion of "la poésie pure" in the name of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Cocteau could scarcely have been unaware of the controversy that ensued, in which ultimately the partisans of purity would be the losers.

Cocteau found a way of unifying all his diverse artistic activities by calling each one a form of poetry: somehow, this raised their tone. His numerous works are listed as "Poetry of the Novel," "Poetry of Criticism," "Poetry of the Theatre," "Poetry of the Cinema," "Poetry of the Graphic Arts." By this nomenclature, he doubtless wished to emphasize once and for all the preeminence of poetry, and the fact that he regarded himself primarily as "the Poet," indeed, as the heir of Baudelaire who sought to plunge into the Unknown in search of the *new*. Cocteau favors the image of the poet as a diver into the unknown. After rejecting his juvenilia from the canon, he composed some of the most exquisite poems in the language, poems whose rare quality inevitably eludes translation. Moreover, he went on writing poetry into old age. Yet the connecting link of poetry, chosen by himself, will not take one, perhaps, as far as the link of the theater.

For the young Klaus Mann (best remembered today for the dazzlingly free film based on his novel *Mephisto*, whose protagonist is modeled on the actor Gustaf Gründgens, protégé of Field Marshal Hermann Göring), Cocteau was "primarily and essentially, a performer." The son of Thomas Mann had become friendly with Cocteau in Paris in 1926. It is ultimately as "a performer," vulnerable, ever taking risks, acutely aware of a fickle public while professing indifference to it, yet anxious for its esteem and love, that Cocteau emerges from his multifaceted creations.

"*Always hit the same spot* in a different way," he advised the dancer Caryathis, otherwise Élise, wife and muse of his friend, the novelist Marcel Jouhandeau (an unprepossessing pair). What was the same spot in Cocteau's case? It was transience and death, a theme that obsessed him, not surprisingly, since his father—later suspected of being a secret homosexual—shot himself when the boy was barely ten years old, in 1898. Nobody knew why. Although Cocteau rarely spoke of



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his father and, indeed, the fact of the suicide did not become public knowledge until very late in the poet's life, it seems plain that this terrible and mysterious loss dominated his imagination.

For Cocteau, death is intimately connected with speed or the ultra-rapid passage of time. During the 1914–18 war he wrote a poem in prose entitled "Visit." It begins ominously like an opium dream: "I have some sad important news to tell you. I am dead. . . ." A description of the state of being dead follows: "With us, speed is much more vital than with you. I am not talking about the speed that moves from one point to another, but of the speed that does not stir, of speed itself. . . . Our speed is so powerful that it places us at a point of silence and monotony." Then the dead speaker continues: "One of the earliest surprises of the adventure lies in feeling unfolded. Life only shows you a small surface of a sheet of paper folded many times over. The most superficial, freakish, crazy acts of the living are inscribed on this fragile surface. Within, mathematically, symmetry is taking shape. Death alone unfolds the sheet. . . ." The notion that there is a concealed mathematical order in life, rather as there is number in poetry (he uses the word *chiffre*, which can mean "code"), is essential to Cocteau. Access to this secret mathematical order is from time to time granted as a privilege to the poet. Images of death, of self-slaughter, the mystery of time, the secret folded beneath the visible page of life, will frequently be found throughout Cocteau's work, and conceivably they have their origin in his response to his father's mysterious suicide.

Associated with this tragic family secret, with his father's (putative) homosexuality and his own, is the theme of fate and free will. What in life is determined and what is choice? Already in his novel, *Le Grand Écart* (1923)—with its punning title meaning both the splits performed by the circus acrobat and, perhaps more significantly, a great distance, divergence, or deviation—Cocteau wrote: "We believe that we choose but we have no choice." And he went on to relate there the Persian legend to become familiar a decade later through the title of John O'Hara's first novel, *Appointment in Samarra*: Death is surprised to encounter a gardener who is due for his quietus elsewhere, and who flees in terror to the city appointed for his demise.

At the age of fifteen, Cocteau had reputedly fled from his Parisian home and his cultivated bourgeois family. He claimed to have spent his time in Marseilles, among the sailors, the pimps and prostitutes, the bars, the opium dens, the male brothels with their transparent mirrors. Could his own bent be described as fate or choice? The most brilliant and sardonic denial of free will, adumbrated in *Le Grand Écart*, is exposed in his masterly play on the Oedipus legend, that tragic "farce atroce," *La Machine infernale* (1934), where the diabolic gods deceive mortals with false hopes, false clues, and supreme trickery. It is as if the malignant gods themselves have written a script to which the actors have to adhere, whatever contributions they mistakenly think they are making to the plot.

That Cocteau viewed his own course in such a determinist way seems plain. Naturally, by regarding himself as a person enacting a role in a play that had already been written, he reduced the element of human responsibility in affairs. How did he come to see life in such theatrical terms?

The theater is like a (harmless?) drug, and it can even become a kind of substitute religion. Those who have not acquired the addiction or the language of faith do not know the power of the experience. Here is not another form of business enterprise or an entertainment to pass the time, but a process that reminds us how the ancient Greek theater had its origin in religion and religious ritual, and how European drama, too, sprang from medieval mystery plays performed at church. Although the modern theater has traveled far from its spiritual source, at its best it can still come trailing clouds of glory from its distant home. Cocteau knew that well enough in his attempt to revive Greek drama for modern audiences. His play, *Antigone*, written in 1922, preceded dramas by Gide and Giraudoux on Greek themes, and inspired those of Anouilh and Sartre. Certainly, Anouilh acknowledged his debt to the creator of *Orphée*.

As Cocteau himself remarked (in *Opium*, 1930): "This truth of the theatre is the poetry of the theatre, something more true than the truth"—by which he presumably meant the actuality of everyday commonplace or ordinary vision. That paradox of Cocteau's, the projection of a theatrical truth "more true than



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the truth," which serves as a higher or more charged form of "reality," is essential to his view of the drama, indeed, of poetry and art in general. Evidently, it has nothing to do with the kind of drama that has largely predominated in the last thirty years or so: in the work of the admirers of the nihilistic minimalism of Samuel Beckett, for instance, or in the overly didactic plays of leftist political and social commitment written under the long shadow cast by Bertolt Brecht.

Cocteau acquired his love for the stage, and everything associated with it, in early childhood. It was from watching his mother and father leave to go to the theater that he was caught: "I contracted the red and gold sickness," he said later, an addiction to the gilt ornamentation and the crimson plush of the old Parisian theaters. As the curtain rose, he would recall "the solemn moment" of the first time. In the theater, he wrote, "I become a child whom the ticket control tribunal permits to enter Hades." This alludes to the intimidating-looking gentlemen, seated in the foyer at a high desk, whose task it was to verify certain tickets on entry. The "tribunal," along with the "trois coups" or three knocks that thrillingly signal the imminent raising of the curtain, heightened the atmosphere of a visit to the French theater. For Cocteau, the word *tribunal* itself carries sinister, commanding, mysterious associations. Such a body guards the entrance to the underworld, or to another world.

It was not only circus artistes like the clowns Footit and Chocolat that Cocteau loved as a boy, but the larger-than-life actors and actresses, or *monstres sacrés*, who dominated the theater of his youth: Édouard de Max; Mounet-Sully, whom he saw in Victor Hugo's Romantic melodrama, *Ruy Blas* (which he would later adapt for the screen); and the immortal Sarah Bernhardt. Cocteau remembered the frenzy that greeted the great tragic actress when she took her curtain calls, with her right hand resting on the frame of the proscenium arch, in an attitude of exhaustion. The great performers have always known how to prolong a performance in their manner of receiving applause. Then there was Isadora Duncan, the celebrated American dancer, tragically strangled by her long scarf that caught in the wheels of her car, who inspired the strangulation-by-scarf that Cocteau would give to his Jocaste in *La Machine infernale*.

Of the famed Russian dancer Nijinsky, whose decline into madness was to be equally tragic, Cocteau wrote with amazement about his extraordinary transformation on stage. Nijinsky was short, and deformed by his profession, according to Cocteau: "In brief, one could never have believed that this little balding monkey . . . was the idol of the public. Yet he was, and rightly so. Everything about him was arranged to appear from a distance, under the lights. On stage, his excessively broad muscles turned slender. His height increased . . . , and as for his face, it became radiant. Such a metamorphosis is almost unimaginable for those who have not witnessed it." Actors, often barely recognizable in their everyday appearance, are like peacocks who only unfold their gaudy plumage on the boards, where they truly belong. Like the actor, the writer of poetry, fiction, or drama also assumes other identities and undergoes metamorphosis.

In his charming memoirs, *Portraits-Souvenir* (1935), which he brilliantly illustrated with his own caricatures, Cocteau tells how, in his youth, he was crazy about the theater, and that this passion was nourished at the school he attended. The headmaster was Monsieur Dietz, whose nephew, Pierre Laudenbach, would become the great stage actor Pierre Fresnay (perhaps best known to foreign film audiences in the roles of Marcel Pagnol's Marius and the seventeenth-century Saint Vincent de Paul). Of the idols of his youth, like Sarah Bernhardt, Isadora Duncan, Édouard de Max, Cocteau would ask rhetorically: "What had these princes of impropriety to do with propriety, with tact, with restraint, these tigers who lick themselves and yawn in front of everyone, these forces of artifice at grips with that force of nature, the public?" It is no wonder that having been dazzled by these "tigers" he should write rich parts for the *monstres sacrés* of his maturity: for the enchanting Elvire Popesco (who took the role of Jocaste in the revival of *La Machine infernale* in the fifties); for the extraordinary Yvonne de Bray; for such talented creatures of physical beauty as Edwige Feuillère, Maria Casarès, and Jean Marais.

With *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (1946), that attempt to bring off a Romantic melodrama after Victor Hugo, Cocteau declared that common psychology was to be replaced there by "heroic or heraldic psychology." The two



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leading characters, the Queen and the Poet-assassin, or twin-headed eagle, were to bear the same relation to the everyday as heraldic unicorns and lions woven in tapestry bear to real animals. "Their behaviour . . . would belong to the theatre just as those fabulous beasts belong to escutcheons. . . . To make [such a work] visible, I needed décors, costumes, Edwige Feuillère and Jean Marais." In short, Cocteau was trying to reproduce in 1946, after the intense inbred "realism" of the family imbroglio in his play, *Les Parents terribles*, the kind of theatrical experience that had stunned him in his youth, and that happened to accord with a certain desire for poetic remoteness in an era of drab austerity and dread revelations.

When that great Russian impresario, Diaghilev, said to Cocteau: "Astonish me!" he was only encouraging the young man to pursue his own inclinations and gifts. He was treating the poet like a *premier danseur* of the Ballets Russes, a Nijinsky or a Massine, as a performer who takes risks and always surprises the audience. In a sense, the artist, whether on the stage or by means of the word, does take us by surprise; and we should not think much of the theatrical performer—or the literary creator—who did not do something other than what might be generally expected. Much of Cocteau's ability to surprise lies in his often marvelous and musical use of language, in that aspect of his art which can least be conveyed in translation, with his fondness for wordplay, for startling puns ("Mirrors would do well to reflect a little more before returning images"), coupled with a compelling simplicity. The amazingly rich vocabulary that he gave to the Sphinx in *La Machine infernale*, as she wraps Oedipe inextricably in the mysterious coils of the word, remains one of Cocteau's most astounding theatrical achievements.

Cocteau's passion for the theater pierces through the frequent theatrical metaphors in his novels, in *Thomas l'Imposteur*, in *Le Grand Écart*, and notably in *Les Enfants terribles*, that strange work written in a clinic where he was undergoing one of his periodic cures as an opium addict. Paul and Elisabeth, the doomed eccentric brother and sister, in revolt against the commonplace, who live together in bizarre disorder, served as models for the young of the 1930s (including—as Gustaf Gründgens would later assure Cocteau—Klaus Mann and his sister Erika). They also prefigure the anarchical youth and the dropouts of a later era. "The performance of the bedroom began at eleven o'clock at night. Except on Sundays, there were no matinees," we are told. None of the leading characters, not even the one who plays the spectator (Gérard) was aware of acting a part. The jinn of the room struck the three knocks that began the performance: " . . . the play (or bedroom if you wish) hovered on the brink of myth." Every night they enacted the same play. In the drama of their joint suicide, wearing "the buskins of Greek actors, they depart from the hell of the Atrides," observes the narrator in his comment on the "death song" of brother and sister. At the end, the secret room itself becomes a theater open to an audience. All these theatrical allusions occur in a novel that ostensibly has little to do with the theater as such.

Several of Cocteau's films, like a number of his plays, are rooted in the same poetry of mystery and magic—*Orphée* (1949) being an adaptation of his play of 1926, which in turn had employed figures and imagery from his poems. French cinema, from the days of Georges Méliès, had been enchanted with magic. Cocteau, who loved this aspect of film, once declared that no filmic trick would ever take the place of the water-pantomime in the circus that he had first seen when he was seven years old; yet Cocteau spent his time trying to prove the opposite in his movies. What was *Le Sang d'un poète* but a series of mysterious visual devices, a performance designed to fascinate and astonish, based on his private poetic imagery? The cinematograph, as he liked to call it, reinforced his anxiety about time: it showed that a mere difference in tempo allowed people to believe nature was serene. Films now revealed that plants gesticulate; they uncovered the secret "of a bean in process of birth, of an exploding crocus." This concern with magic in film reached its apogee in the fairy tale *La Belle et La Bête*—the frightening yet serene human arms of the candelabra that project to light Beauty's path into the Beast's palace, the strange and touching sound made by the creature with his haunting eyes as he laps water. Cocteau's images remain indelibly in the memory, retaining their power to surprise and enchant at each viewing.



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The difficulty of "placing" Cocteau does not become any easier with the passing of time. One obstacle is the legend he fostered while bemoaning it: the self-advertisement of his early years, neatly combined with his advertisement of the likes of Satie and Stravinsky, de Chirico and Picasso. Another is the notoriously long succession of handsome young men. Among these figured that precocious and ill-fated youth, Raymond Radiguet, author of *Le Diable au corps*, who (so Cocteau maintained) converted him to a neoclassical simplicity; the less talented but heroic Jean Desbordes (later tortured to death by the Gestapo); and not least, his adopted son and heir, the Yugoslav-born Edouard Dermit.

Some of Cocteau's young admirers and acolytes were said to climb the lamppost outside his residence in the rue d'Anjou, in quest of a glimpse of their idol. Others, like the outrageous Maurice Sachs, who purloined Cocteau's books and papers, followed him temporarily in his flirtation with the religious revival sponsored by the neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain—a movement qualified by a wit as "le pédérasthomisme." Goings-on at the Hôtel Welcome, on the waterfront of the picturesque Mediterranean fishing port of Villefranche-sur-mer, frequented by Cocteau and his friends, caused eyebrows to be raised. The poet said he took to opium in his total desolation at the sudden death of Raymond Radiguet—he could not bring himself to attend the funeral—but in all likelihood he had tried opium earlier, and he went on smoking what he called his "remedy" throughout his life, sometimes falling foul of the law.

Yet despite this bohemian air of disorder and scandal, nothing seems to have deterred Cocteau from seriously pursuing his varied literary and artistic tasks with constant professional ardor. He entitled a collection of reminiscences and reflections, *La Difficulté d'être*, after the dying words uttered by Fontenelle in 1757, commenting that where the centenarian writer's existential disquiet surfaced only in his last hours, "Mine has always been with me." That sense of not being at ease with himself or with life permeates Cocteau's work and, notwithstanding its surface dazzle, gives it an underlying gravity. The brevity of youth, so pertinent to his love of it, naturally exacerbates his obsession with the rapid passing of time, with mirrors that give back a declining image of the self and serve as a gateway to death.

If, for Cocteau, poetry is a kind of algebra, his idea of numerology is different from an accountant's. Do two and two make four—or twenty-two? he inquired, adding that "two chairs, two apples, do not make four." His awareness of a subtle incongruity, of all that remains unknown, would lead him in later years to believe in flying saucers and other dubious phenomena. Cocteau was not an intellectual. At every opportunity he tended, moreover, to denigrate the intellect. To Jean-Marie Magnan he wrote in 1958: "People have lost devout respect for the oracle—for the word obtained through a kind of alchemy suited to *reducing the role of the intellect* and to allowing the unknown to take root in this world (the Heurtebise attempt)." This—with his emphasis—was an allusion to the guardian angel, Heurtebise, whose wings are concealed under glass sheets as carried on a glazier's back, and who figures in Cocteau's poetry and dramatic work. A year later, writing to the same correspondent, Cocteau proclaimed: ". . . the intellect—our worst enemy." A purely intellectual approach to Cocteau is therefore likely to be self-defeating, and that is doubtless what some hold against him. Of course, this anti-rationalism of Cocteau's is convenient for him and can sometimes lead to nonsense (or worse) if taken to its logical conclusion. All the same, his constant reminder that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in philosophy can be a timely corrective in a materialistic, technological age.

One reason why Cocteau does not fit easily into accounts of twentieth-century literature is because he was not associated with any prevailing group. He remained aloof from movements in a country where they play an important part in cultural life. At the same time, as panegyrist or contributor, he was on the fringe of such vital and influential forces as the Ballets Russes, the new jazzy modernism, the whole mode of experimentation as opposed to tradition. The Surrealists, who represented the most powerful element in French artistic life between the wars, gave him the cold shoulder. The great panjandrum of Surrealism, André Breton, loathed homosexuality and homosexuals and was at daggers drawn with Cocteau. As for André Gide, who ruled over the dominant journal *La Nouvelle*



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*Revue Française*, he found devious ways to wound the younger man, despite or maybe because of their homosexual tastes. The great debate and battle of the thirties that raged between anti-Fascists and adherents of Communism on one hand, and those tempted by Fascism and Nazism on the other, apparently did not touch Cocteau, the self-engaged poet and dramatist.

Opinions generally concur that the author of *Les Enfants terribles* was an egoist and narcissist, absorbed with himself, his art, his love affairs, and his friends. Is there any writer of the period whose existence is so fully documented in visual images? His physical appearance was recorded in portraits by such artists as Marie Laurencin and Modigliani, in photographs by Man Ray and others. Numerous are the depictions of his beautiful hands. He would consecrate himself, his preoccupations, and his circle in his self-indulgent film *Le Testament d'Orphée*.

Simone de Beauvoir, much impressed when young by such Cocteau creations as the Eugènes of *Le Potomak*, met him for the first time not long before the liberation of Paris in 1944 and was fascinated by his dazzling virtuosity with the spoken word, by his astonishing monologue. She noted, "You realized at once that he was very concerned with himself, but this narcissism had nothing narrow about it and did not cut him off from others." It was to her, and to Sartre, both shortly to promulgate the influential doctrine of literary commitment to the Left, that Cocteau chose to hold forth about how the Poet must keep aloof from the age and remain indifferent to all the mad acts of war and politics. This was the attitude of fin de siècle aestheticism in which he had been bred. "The lot of them get on our nerves . . . the Germans . . . the Americans . . . ," he complained. That remark might be regarded as the understatement of the year concerning the brutally foul activities of the Nazis in 1944. Besides, he remained somewhat less aloof from the Germans than his words might suggest.

When France was defeated by Nazi Germany in 1940, Cocteau suddenly chose to remind himself of his esteem for Briand and Caillaux, politicians who had favored Franco-German entente. It would be absurd to suggest that the poet warmed to Hitler or to his French admirers and servants. Avowedly apolitical, he was essentially an anarchist-conservative or conservative-anarchist, here as in literature. During the Occupation, supporters of the breast-beating Vichy regime actually accused Cocteau of causing the *débâcle* by his moral turpitude (by which they meant his homosexuality). He was attacked in the notorious collaborationist paper, *Je Suis Partout*, by Lucien Rebatet (though he signed the appeal for that odious writer's pardon after the war). Once, Jean Marais, Cocteau's companion at the time, went so far as to strike the critic Alain Laubreaux for his scurrilous attack on the playwright (an episode later re-created in François Truffaut's film *The Last Métro*). Cocteau himself was beaten up when he declined to salute the flag at a parade of French volunteers who were departing to join the German forces on the Russian front.

Along with many others during the Occupation, however, Cocteau was involved in productions of his plays and films; and while these enterprises doubtless kept his head above water, they also required the imprimatur of the Germans. Nothing could be performed or published without it. Cocteau associated with the equivocal German writer and semi-official cultural ambassador, Ernst Jünger, whom he met at the home of his old friend, the novelist and Vichyite diplomat, Paul Morand. Cocteau penned a laudatory publicity article for an exhibition of the work of Arno Breker, Hitler's favorite sculptor. The author of *The Frivolous Prince* did not seem to realize how such associations would compromise him, or how little they accorded with his (unsuccessful) intervention on behalf of his friend, the poet Max Jacob, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, who died in Drancy prison. After the war, Cocteau paid a social visit to Arno Breker when in Germany in 1952 for the production of his play, *Bacchus*, in which Gustaf Gründgens played an important role. In his diary Cocteau remarked that the sculptor had saved both Picasso and himself from the worst during the Occupation. The poet was equally grateful to his Communist colleagues, Aragon and Éluard, for protecting him at the Liberation.

Like most of the littérateurs who had not hastily joined the bandwagon of Resistance literary groups, Cocteau had to face a *comité d'épuration*, or purge committee, though apparently without any ill effect. He began to moan a great deal, not just about the savage settling of old scores, but about the way things



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were going in post-war France. It seemed to him that he had been singled out for persecution. How was it, he wondered gloomily, that Paul Claudel, the Catholic poet and dramatist, had managed to get away with turning an ode to Marshal Pétain into one to General de Gaulle? Cocteau always felt that nobody took him seriously, at his proper valuation as an artist. "There is no writer as well-known, unknown, unappreciated as I am," he lamented. What he desired was *"respectful trust"* (his italics) owing to his years and his oeuvre. He wanted to know why he was left out when contemporaries like Malraux, Montherlant, Sartre, Camus, and Anouilh all received proper consideration. The repetition of this dissatisfaction becomes embarrassing in the light of the honors that were to be showered upon him, including elevation to immortality in the Académie Française. No honors could ever be enough to prove to Cocteau that he was respected and loved as he wished.

There is something disproportionate in Cocteau's single-minded concern with finding a suitable vehicle for Jean Marais, with theater production, and filmmaking at a period of universal agony. Cocteau worried profoundly about those he loved and idealized, but his imaginative embrace was not large. He lacked a sense of evil where human conduct is concerned. The enmity of fate, the often touching folly and blindness of mortals—these result in human tragedy. What of responsibility for one's sins of commission and omission? The capacity of humankind for evil is eluded, and this ultimately serves as a limiting factor in his work.

For Cocteau, all the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players. We may well be weary of a form of drama that ostentatiously thrusts the dramatist's tender social conscience, his "revolutionary" credentials, and his (predominantly leftist) sermonizing commonplaces upon us, but are we ready today to welcome a kind of drama like Cocteau's that often feeds upon itself? Would a return to his work, as distinct from his person, contribute to the long-awaited reaction against the current fashion of what he himself called "conformist anticonformism"? Must we be forever moving up and down on the seesaw of art for art's sake or an art that is politically and socially "committed"?

The dilemma is troubling. Cocteau himself complained to Jean Marais in 1954: "What a peculiar age when politics have a hand in anything and everything!" Two years earlier, he had remarked to Marais: "Like all ages, this age is subject to the false perspectives of actuality. One must understand it and swallow the pill. I often have it stuck in my throat, but I strive to stay within my line in spite of appearances against me." This was a respectable and once widely admired artistic standpoint, before Brecht and Sartre took command. It would be entirely admirable, if only actuality did not keep getting in the way of art and artists. As for ourselves, as readers or members of an audience, we naturally want to have it both ways. We esteem highly those fine artists who have devoted themselves single-mindedly to their art, and who have given us immense pleasure and enlightenment, but we are not at all happy if they choose a pernicious ideology or if—like Cocteau—they do not even seem to be aware that any moral choice is at stake.



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# A Partiality for Lords

## Evelyn Waugh and Snobbery

DONALD GREENE

In the famous preface to his edition of Juvenal ("editorum in usum edidit"), A. E. Housman, after enunciating a fundamental principle of textual criticism that editors seemed unable to grasp, acidly commented, "Three minutes' thought would have sufficed to find this out; but thought is irksome, and three minutes is a long time." Sometimes the student of modern literature, confronted by some preposterous judgment by a critic, is tempted to emend this statement: "Three minutes' reading of the author's text would suffice to demolish this nonsense; but reading is irksome, and three minutes is a long time." The adoption a priori of some simplistic dogma and the application of it to an author's writings saves the critic this trouble. Housman describes how the technique works: if someone should try to arrive at an estimation of the quality of Pindar's mind by reading what he wrote, he may be exhorted, "Shut that book; Boeotians are stupid, Pindar was a Boeotian, therefore Pindar was stupid."

Eveyln Waugh has been regularly subjected to a like syllogism: "Snobbery is undesirable; Waugh was a snob; therefore his snobbish writings should be ignored. Shut that book." This is a slight variant from Housman's illustration. Housman's remark began with an indictment of a whole people to which the author had the misfortune to belong; almost the only thing known about Pindar (apart from his writings) was his place of origin. Since then biography has made great strides. With Waugh and others we can start with a vast mass of information and pseudo-information about the writer's life and habits, make a selection from it so as to place him neatly in a well-defined category (it is rather like the old device of trying to determine someone's "ruling passion"), and then pass judgment on his writings as viewed in the light of that determination.

It is hard to say when "psychocriticism," as we might call it, began, in which biographical and psychological speculation combines with and often takes over the actual reading of what the author has written. Certainly it was well developed in the nineteenth century, when Macaulay and Thackeray announced that, since Swift was insane, the public would be well advised not to read his deleterious ravings at all. More recently, Swift has been found, by Norman O. Brown with an earlier assist from Aldous Huxley, to have been the victim of an "excremental obsession," though if one takes the trouble to read the chief evidence for that charge, the so-called "scatological poems," one will see that they are scathing satires *against* individuals who have an excremental obsession. Jane Austen's writings are vitiated by their "limitations," which she must have had as a cloistered spinster, raised in a remote country parsonage, who therefore "could never have got to know much about life"—quotation from Eudora Welty, of all people. Jane Austen's letters show that, in fact, she got around a good deal and was quite familiar with the many scandals of Regency society. A startling amount of illicit sexual activity takes place in her novels; there is even a fairly transparent allusion to

✪ DONALD GREENE is the author of *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* and *The Age of Exuberance*, and editor of *Political Writings: The Works of Samuel Johnson*, Volume 10.



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homosexuality, something unexpected in early nineteenth-century novels. If this is what is meant by "knowing about life," and it seems to be, I think she can be acquitted of the charge of ignorance of it. Many other such victims could be listed.

Of course, serious writers have protested, without much effect, at this subordination of their work to often titillating speculation about their private lives and thoughts. When a friend suggested writing a biographical piece about her, Willa Cather refused, saying that "she hated biography because no biographical sketch is thought interesting unless the subject is presented as a freak." How right she was: the burning question at the moment about Willa Cather is "To what extent were her friendships with other women a manifestation of lesbianism?" As Roy Campbell put it, literary biography "is the most perfect instrument that has yet been invented to enable the mediocre to patronize the great." Germaine Greer has been the most outspoken: "Of all the biographical organisms, literary biography is the most predatory, the laziest and the least enterprising. . . . Since the microbe came to full maturity in James Boswell, it has grown steadily more resistant and more intensive. . . . *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and *London* are worth all Boswell's scribbling, but they remain unread. Boswell is easier to take." Exactly.

Excremental obsession, spinsterly limitation, and the rest are bad enough. But over the years the most familiar and damaging charge against a writer has been that of snobbery. As with sin, everyone is against it; it requires only minimal effort to detect it in almost any writer, indeed almost any human being (except oneself). Even Johnson grumbled about Pope, "Next to the pleasure of contemplating his possessions seems to be that of enumerating the men of high rank with whom he was acquainted." Thackeray popularized the term "snob"—it became virtually his trademark—and got a great deal of mileage out of attacking Bulwer-Lytton and others of the "silver fork" school of novelists, though it is a little hard to see what is so iniquitous about using a silver fork. There was a time when it was asked how Henry James, whose works deal so exclusively with the "upper classes," could seriously be considered an important novelist, against the claims of such recorders of the doings of "the common people" as the early Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells and, later, J. B. Priestley. Recent decades, however, seem to have acquired enough critical acumen to make the charge of snobbery against James seem merely silly.

But the stigma of "snob" pursues Evelyn Waugh as relentlessly now as it did forty or fifty years ago. When colleagues have asked me whom I thought the finest English novelist of the mid-twentieth century and I named Waugh, the response has often been, "What, that snob? I wouldn't dream of reading *him*." ("Shut that book.") (One such colleague, a highly regarded critic in her own field, once remarked to me in all seriousness, "After all, the central problem in Jane Austen studies is whether or not she was a virgin.") The most recent biography of Waugh, written by Martin Stannard, and published in 1987, states flatly on its first page, "He was, in the conventional sense of the word, a 'snob,' " and the epithet is repeated elsewhere in the book.

What is the conventional sense of "snob"? Most dictionaries begin with something like "person with exaggerated respect for social position and wealth" *(Concise Oxford English Dictionary)* or "a person who attaches great importance to wealth, social position, etc." *(Webster's New World Dictionary)*. "I am sometimes accused of a partiality for lords," Waugh once wrote wonderingly, in the course of a hilarious narrative of a lord who had tried to intrude, uninvited, into his house, and had the door slammed in his face. It would be impossible in a short space to recount all that has been adduced from supposed biographical data in support of the allegation of snobbery as Waugh's ruling passion, though a little will be said about it here. But, adhering to D. H. Lawrence's maxim, "Never trust the artist"—and, a fortiori, never trust a biographer's reconstruction of the artist—"trust the tale," let us open the books and see how Waugh's partiality for lords and exaggerated respect for social position and wealth are demonstrated there.

Let us begin with the first page of Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928). It is an account of a gala dinner of an exclusive Oxford club of socially elite undergraduates and former undergraduates:

> There is tradition behind the Bollinger; it numbers reigning kings among its members. At the last



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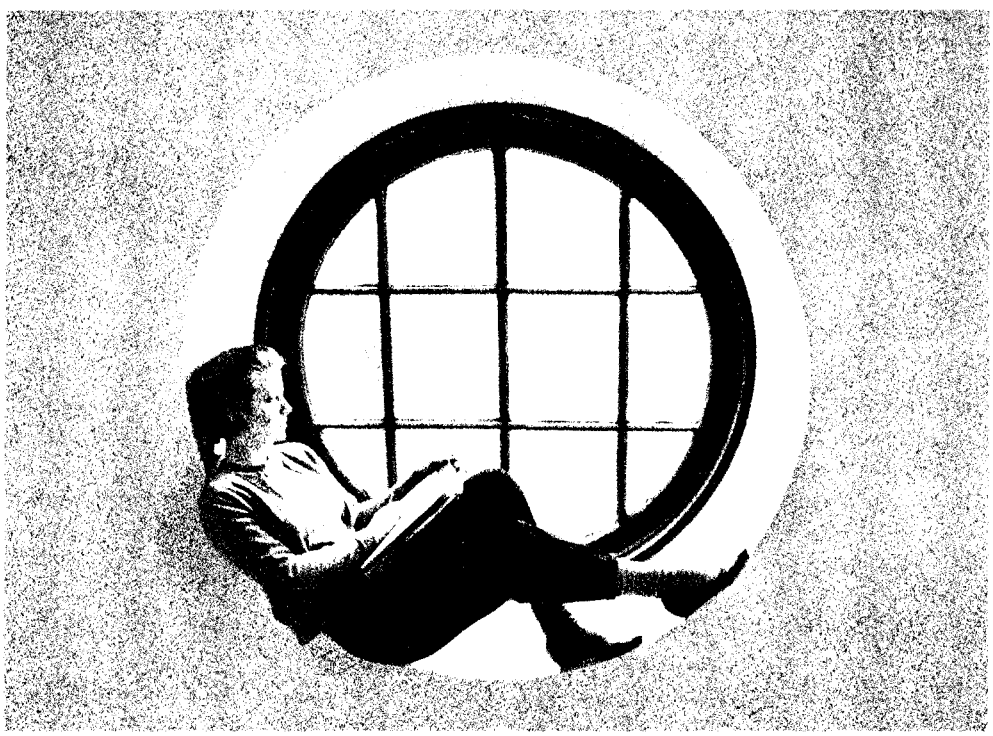



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dinner, three years ago, a fox had been brought in in a cage and stoned to death with champagne bottles. What an evening that had been! This was the first meeting since then, and from all over Europe old members had rallied for the occasion. For two days they had been pouring into Oxford: epileptic royalty from their villas of exile; uncouth peers from crumbling country seats; smooth young men of uncertain tastes from embassies and legations; illiterate lairds from wet granite hovels in the Highlands; ambitious young barristers and Conservative candidates torn from the London season. . . . All that was most sonorous of name and title was there for the beano. . . . A shriller note could now be heard from Sir Alastair's rooms; any who have heard that sound will shrink at the recollection; it is the sound of the English county families baying for broken glass.

The Bollinger are militantly philistine. They destroy a grand piano, a painting by Matisse, and the draft of a poem found in the rooms of undergraduates so lowbred as to evince an interest in the arts. When the modest young intellectual Paul Pennyfeather gets in their way, they "debag" him, and the Oxford authorities promptly expel him for indecency.

This is exaggerated respect for social position and wealth? Or is it rather one of the most deadly lampoons of the "upper classes" that have ever appeared in English fiction, even when one considers all that writers from Elizabethan and Restoration times, through Fielding, Smollett, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, and beyond have pilloried in their members—Sir Toby Belch, Sir Fopling Flutter, Lord Booby, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Lord Frederick Verisopht, the Earl and Countess of Bareacres, to mention some? It has been suggested that the aristocratic Herbert family had qualms about Waugh's marrying into their clan because of his plebeian origins (they were not all that plebeian, as we shall see). It seems more likely that, if such distrust did in fact exist, it was rather the result of Waugh's setting himself up from the very beginning as the strident *censor morum* of their class.

A little later in *Decline and Fall* we meet some prize specimens of the nobility. One is the ruthlessly overbearing and insultingly dowdy Countess of Circumference, the title no doubt referring to her physique:

> "How did your calceolarias do last year? . . . "
> "Lovely," said Flossie.
> "I don't believe a word of it," said Lady Circumference. "Nobody's calceolarias did well last year."

There is her fatuous Earl:

> "Fond of sports, eh? I mean these sort of sports."
> "Oh, yes," said Paul. "I think they're so good for the boys."
> "Do you? Do you think that," said Lord Circumference very earnestly: "You think they're good for the boys?"
> "Yes," said Paul; "don't you?"
> "Me? Yes, oh yes. I think so too. Very good for the boys. . . . "

And there is their unfortunate little heir Lord Tangent: Waugh assumes the reader will recall something of high school geometry. Waugh inherited the tradition of comic significant nomenclature of the older dramatists and novelists and used it more cleverly and boldly than some: one might consider such outrageously suggestive names as Lady Everyman, Lady Anchorage, Lady Chasm, Lady Cockpurse, Lady Throbbing, descendants of Congreve's Lady Wishfort. Here and in other novels Lady Circumference takes on more than Dickensian proportions. Her moment of triumph comes at Mrs. Ape's revival meeting, when the American evangelist's rhetoric causes her aristocratic audience to be filled with emotion as they contemplate their many sins. The hostess, Lady Metroland, is grateful when Lady Circumference interrupts with the cry, "What a damned impudent woman!" and breaks the spell.

"Those two poles of savagery, Lady Circumference and Lady Metroland," these contrasting leaders of society are called. Margot, Viscountess Metroland, formerly the Honourable Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde (we never learn her unmarried name), beautiful, fashionable, exquisitely clothed, exquisitely soignée, appears in even more of the novels than Lady Circumference. She is perhaps Waugh's greatest creation. There is nobody else quite like her in fiction; perhaps Becky Sharp comes closest, but even Becky hasn't quite Margot's panache, and sometimes overreaches herself, as Margot never does. Her antecedents are obscure; the chain of South American brothels that she has inherited from her father and runs very efficiently provides her with great wealth; her sexual life is uninhibited and she maintains stables of young men for her ser-



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vice. She is rumored to have poisoned her no doubt boring first husband, brother of Lord Pastmaster, on whose death the earldom descends to her son Peter, who in his late teens becomes an alcoholic. When Margot gets into trouble with the law for white-slave trafficking, her *noblesse* fails to *oblige*, and she permits her young fiancé Paul Pennyfeather to be sentenced to seven years' hard labor in her place. Paul, who has been madly in love with her, is uneasy "as Boy Scout honour whispered that Margot had got him into a row and ought jolly well to own up and face the music." But he still wants to marry her if she will wait until he gets out of prison. Fearing, however, for her somewhat shaky social position after this escapade, Margot marries an unattractive politician on the make, Lord Metroland. Paul, reflecting that Margot will age considerably during the seven years—she is probably in her mid or late thirties, since her son is sixteen—is on the whole relieved. Perhaps it is intended as poetic justice that our last glimpse of Margot in the 1960s—she must be seventy by this time—finds her living alone in a darkened room in the Ritz Hotel, her only interest in life watching television. Even Becky Sharp came to a happier end. But it was quite a life while it lasted.

The question of the "originals" of Waugh's major characters inevitably comes up. Anyone who has tried his hand at writing fiction knows that every character that he draws derives from someone in his own experience, personal or literary: it is impossible to create them in a vacuum, though at the same time the writer is free to modify or combine characters in whatever way his artistic instincts suggest. Many such identifications have been proposed for Waugh's characters, and many of them are plausible, though, as always, they must be treated cautiously. Lady Circumference has often been said to have been modeled on the mother of Waugh's intimate college friend, Alistair Graham. Certainly the record in Waugh's diaries shows that Mrs. Graham could be intolerably rude and irascible. But she is also described as neurotic and given to tantrums, characteristics hard to associate with Lady Circumference's sublime self-assurance.

With Lady Metroland we find ourselves moving in very high social circles indeed. The name "Margot" in the 1920s inevitably meant Margot, née Tennant, Countess of Oxford, wife of former Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. She was a notorious publicity hound and gossip monger, and, unlike her namesake, far from beautiful or wealthy. It seems more likely that the inspiration for Margot Metroland was Edwina Ashley, later Countess Mountbatten, one of the most famous beauties of her day, immensely rich, her fortune deriving from what the stodgier British nobility thought a somewhat disreputable source, her grandfather, the German-Jewish banker Sir Ernest Cassel, who had risen from a humble background in central Europe to become King Edward VII's financial adviser and crony.

Cassel's beloved granddaughter and heiress made a brilliant début in 1919 and in 1922 a brilliant match with one of the most eligible bachelors of the time, the handsome Lord Louis Mountbatten, formerly His Serene Highness Prince Louis of Battenberg, later Earl Mountbatten of Burma, the addition coming from his appointment, during World War II, as Supreme Allied Commander in Southeast Asia; he was as well a great-grandson of Queen Victoria, cousin of Kings George V and VI, nephew of the Czar, brother-in-law of the King of Sweden, uncle of Queen Elizabeth II's consort. It might be thought that, if there was any "nob" whom a snobbish Waugh would have sucked up to, it was he; the record shows otherwise. Mountbatten himself was apparently one of the great snobs of history. His official biographer, for all that he maintains that he is giving "a generally favourable portrait" of his subject, astoundingly begins his book with an adaptation of the opening sentence of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, describing the greatest snob in literature, Sir Walter Elliot: "Admiral of the Fleet the Earl Mountbatten of Burma was a man who, for his own amusement, rarely took up any book unless it were one of genealogy, most especially one relating to his own forebears," and recounts that Mountbatten's staff laid bets "to see who could most quickly make him refer to 'my niece, the Queen'; he never hesitated to invoke her name if it would help him secure what he wanted."

The marriage was much romanticized, as were the subsequent careers of both husband and wife. But recent detailed biographies of both, by Philip Ziegler, 1985, and Richard Hough, 1983, have deflated much of the glamor. After the birth of their two daughters, they went their separate ways. Lady Louis



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embarked on a career of extramarital sex: the allegation of an affair between her and the black singer Paul Robeson caused much scandal (one recalls the shock at the Llanabba sports when Margot arrived escorted by the black musician Chokey), and during Mountbatten's tenure of the viceroyalty of India, the vicereine's liaison with the Hindu leader Pandit Nehru was an open secret. Mountbatten seems not to have minded: his biographer describes him as "not sexually demanding," and entirely intent on advancing his career. If so, the parallel between the relationship of the Mountbattens and that of the Metrolands was striking. Both were marriages of convenience, and in both the *maris* were highly *complaisants*. In *Vile Bodies*, Lord Metroland, returning home and finding the hat of young Alastair Trumpington in the hall, is careful not to ascend the stairs until he hears Trumpington's steps leaving Margot's bedroom.

It was bold of Waugh so closely to record in his fiction the scandal about this high-placed couple. Mountbatten himself received no mercy and almost no disguise in the last novel of Waugh's World War II trilogy, *Unconditional Surrender*. One of the trilogy's many incompetent high-ranking military officers, who would be ridiculous if they were not so dangerous, is General Whale, reduced by his subordinates to "Sprat," Chief of Hazardous Offensive Operations. His staff also call him "Brides-in-the-Bath," after the notorious George Joseph Smith, who was hanged in 1915 for his habit of marrying one wife after another, moving with her into lodgings where he had ascertained that a bathtub was available, and effecting her "accidental" death by drowning for the sake of her savings or insurance. General Whale earns this sobriquet because "all the operations he sponsored seemed to require the extermination of all involved." At one time, "there had been a delirious episode when he had helped drive numerous Canadians to their death at Dieppe." The only action during the war in which Canadian troops were engaged at Dieppe was the disastrous assault on that place on August 19, 1942. "By the end of the day," Ziegler records, "sixty-eight per cent of the Canadians and twenty per cent of the commandos were dead or wounded; two thousand prisoners and nearly a thousand dead were left behind when the battered armada turned for home." The planner and director of this operation was Vice-Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations; his name is anathema to many in Canada to this day.

In spite of glamorization, particularly by Noël Coward in the film *In Which We Serve*, Mountbatten's military and public career, as depicted in Ziegler's "generally favourable portrait," seems little more than a succession of disasters. His foolhardiness in his earliest destroyer command resulted in his ship's first receiving a torpedo and later being sunk; the consensus of his peers was that as a naval officer he was "second-rate." His Supreme Command in Southeast Asia was a series of squabbles with his fellow officers, British and American. The partition of India in 1947, over which he presided as viceroy, resulted in a ghastly series of massacres of warring Hindus and Muslims. "Only" one hundred thousand were massacred, Mountbatten is reported as having complacently pronounced. Other estimates ranged from twice to five times that number.

Waugh had dealings with Mountbatten during his own tour of duty as an officer in Combined Operations and was well aware of how little Mountbatten's operational plans contributed to winning the war and how much to his own glorification. Waugh lunched with him in May 1943, "found the house a nest of Communists, and behaved rather badly," as he recorded in his diary, and indeed one of the guests had been J. D. Bernal, a noisy exponent of communism. For all Mountbatten's royal connections and Edwina's millions, they cultivated, no doubt for purposes of popularity, a "leftist" image. Later Waugh expostulated with Mountbatten about his own military future—"Result, none."

Again, one must ask, do Waugh's relations with Mountbatten demonstrate snobbish deference to rank and authority? What of his relations with those below him in military rank? One of the items in the charge of snobbery against Waugh is that in the later part of the war he was relieved from active army duty because of his arrogant treatment of the troops under his command. No specific instance of such treatment has ever been cited, so far as I know. The charge was made, of course, by the superior officers who so relieved him, and one wonders whether the "unpopularity" of which he was accused was not rather unpop-



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ularity with his superiors than his inferiors in rank—with the General Whales and Air Marshal Beeches rather than the privates and halberdiers. He disagreed volubly with his commanding officer in Yugoslavia, Brigadier Sir Fitzroy Maclean, over the British policy in that country that it was Maclean's duty to implement—and, given historical hindsight, Waugh may well have been right. There is the insolent, if hilarious, riposte Captain Waugh made when he was appointed aide-de-camp to a major-general, who reproached him for being "slightly drunk" *(sic* Waugh): "I told him I could not change the habits of a lifetime for a whim of his." There is much more criticism in the war novels of officers than of the rank and file. To confuse the issue, some years ago there appeared in *Punch* a report of an interview with Waugh's former batman (soldier servant). The interviewer was evidently trying to coax the man into revealing reprehensible incidents in Waugh's conduct to those under his command. He got nowhere: Waugh was reported to have been, from the private soldier's point of view, a fair and courteous officer. After much prodding, the interviewer succeeded in getting only one story out of him: he could recall an occasion when Waugh had chided him for serving hot gravy with a plate of cold meat.

Margot's husband, Viscount Metroland, is as relentlessly upwardly mobile as Uriah Heep and Rex Mottram. In his humble youth, he says, he had learned the value of his motto, "Aim high," from his success in throwing stones at cats. Eventually he becomes Home Secretary, and he displays something of the moral values of the famous Home Secretary of the twenties, William Joynson-Hicks, Viscount Brentford, also from relatively undistinguished stock (he added the "Joynson" when he began his rise). It was Brentford who initiated police action against D. H. Lawrence's paintings and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and enforced the ban on importation of Joyce's *Ulysses*. "Particularly against books the Home Secretary is," says the customs official in *Vile Bodies*, burning the manuscript of Adam Symes's autobiography. "If we can't stamp out literature in this country, we can at least stop it being brought in from outside." When Metroland asks Peter Pastmaster, a well-informed youth who reads Havelock Ellis, the reason for his mother's absence, and Peter explains—no doubt that she is having her menstrual period—he is appalled: "He said that he didn't know what things were coming to and that even in the slums such things were not spoken about by children."

Lord Metroland's title is hardly redolent of historic aristocracy. "Metroland" was a contemporary advertising gimmick of the Metropolitan Railway Company, designed to encourage potential customers to settle in the outer suburbs of London and make use of its commuter services. The press baron Lord Monomark takes his equally ridiculous title from another advertising gimmick, this coined by a firm offering to provide, for a fee, a unique number to be engraved on one's valuables, so as to facilitate retrieval in case of burglary. Lords Copper and Zinc, proprietors respectively of the *Daily Beast* and the *Daily Brute,* likewise bear titles not calculated to inspire respect for the dignity of the peerage. Lord Copper is another of Waugh's great Dickensian or hyper-Dickensian creations. His sycophants' "up to a point, Lord Copper," a euphemism for "no," has become proverbial. He has often been identified with Lord Beaverbrook, proprietor of the *Daily Express,* for which Waugh had worked as a reporter. Beaverbrook's biographer, A. J. P. Taylor, says that he asked Waugh about this, and Waugh denied the charge (it is always wise for a novelist to do so). Nevertheless, Taylor reports, Beaverbrook was quite familiar with the meaning of "up to a point."

*Vile Bodies* exhibits an even more bizarre menagerie of titled individuals than *Decline and Fall.* There is the Honourable Agatha Runcible, daughter of Lord Chasm, a prominent Conservative; she turns up for breakfast at the Prime Minister's residence, 10 Downing Street, clad in exiguous Hawaiian costume; later, when drunk, she takes the steering wheel of a racing car, crashes it, and is killed. There is the Duchess of Stayle (another significant title), who bullies her daughter Lady Ursula into marriage with a man she dislikes (while the Duke refuses to get involved, being too busy saying his prayers). There are the Marquess of Vanburgh and the Earl of Balcairn, each with half a dozen other titles of honor, fiercely competing gossip columnists, the latter for Lord Monomark's *Daily Excess*. His mother, the former Countess, now Mrs. Panrast, is a predatory lesbian. Poor Balcairn commits suicide when Vanburgh scoops him on Mrs. Ape's revival meeting.



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Then there is the Malpractice family: Fanny, Dowager Countess of Throbbing, a superannuated promiscuous Edwardian beauty; her son, the present Earl, a dully respectable diplomat, too boring even for Lady Ursula, no sophisticate; his father, who died of drug addiction (if the late Earl *was* his father; when Lady Throbbing, in Balcairn's fictional report of the revival meeting, confesses her sins, his editor instructs an underling to look up photographs of all three candidates); his brother, the Honourable Miles Malpractice, a well-known homosexual-about-town; his sister, an employee in Lady Metroland's chain of South American brothels. As Matthew Arnold said of the Shelley circle, what a set!

Exaggerated respect for the socially exalted? Royalty itself is not immune, as we have seen with Mountbatten. The reigning monarch makes, by implication, a cameo appearance: Lottie Crump introduces the addlepated Agatha Runcible to her guests—"That's the King with the beard. . . . No, dearie, the King of Ruritania." George V's beard, or "beaver" as it was called by the Bright Young People, was classic. His ex-Majesty of Ruritania is so poor that he has to travel third-class on the train when he goes to visit his mad ex-Queen in her asylum, except when Lottie charitably gives him a lift in her car. There is His Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence, who is persuaded to attend Charles Ryder's exhibition of tropical landscapes, and whose only piece of art criticism is "Pretty hot out there, I should think. Makes me feel quite uncomfortable in my greatcoat." His Royal Highness may have been modeled on King George VI's brother, the late Duke of Gloucester, who was not noted for intellectuality. And there is His Imperial Majesty, Seth of Azania, Chief of the Chiefs of Sakuyu, Lord of Wanda and Tyrant of the Seas, Bachelor of the Arts of Oxford University. Seth (and Waugh) create a duplicate of the British peerage system among the cannibalistic Azanians; a good representative is the Earl of Ngumo, "in full gala dress; on his head a lion's mane busby; on his shoulders a shapeless fur mantle; a red satin skirt; brass bangles and a necklace of lion's teeth."

At the summit of the Azanian aristocracy is the Irish adventurer Connolly, Duke of Ukaka, who, as head of the armed services, signs himself, with correct protocol, "Ukaka C-in-C." When he is expelled from the country as an undesirable alien, his luggage, in Waugh's illustration, displays the strawberry leaves of a ducal coronet. Her Grace the Duchess of Ukaka, an Azanian native, is known to all, including her husband, as "Black Bitch." When Mountbatten made an official visit to Ethiopia in 1954, he and his entourage briefed themselves by reading *Black Mischief*, and Mountbatten apparently enjoyed it, although the British consul at Addis Ababa informed him that Waugh had written it only to spite the wife of the British Minister, who had snubbed him—a fairly representative sample of the kind of literary criticism to which Waugh has been subjected.

In fact, Lady Courteney in the novel is treated more leniently than her husband Sir Samson, the "envoy extraordinary," more concerned about the rubber duck he plays with in his bath and the dimensions of the Great Pyramid than his diplomatic duties. Another specimen of the diplomatic service is the ex-ambassador Sir Ralph Brompton, who devotes himself to homosexual cruising and spreading left-wing propaganda among the British troops in World War II—a figure probably inspired by Sir Harold Nicolson, who stood as a socialist candidate for Parliament in the hope of being rewarded by the Labour government with a peerage, but was disappointed. At the head of the British political establishment are the frequently alternating prime ministers, who no doubt reflect the alternations of Stanley Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald: Sir James Brown, whose wife exhorts, "Now, children, do try to remember to talk to your father at breakfast. He was quite hurt yesterday. He feels out of things. It's so easy to bring him into the conversation if you take a little trouble, and he does so enjoy hearing about things," and the Right Honourable Walter Outrage, whose name belies his habitual timidity, especially in sexual matters (although he has a fetish about Oriental women, when the Baroness Yoshiwara of the Japanese Embassy offers her services, he nervously rejects them). There are the Hollywood knights of *The Loved One*, Sir Ambrose Abercrombie and Sir Francis Hinsley, whom Sir Ambrose looks down on as a "Lloyd George creation"—that prime minister was notorious for freely bestowing honors in return for contributions to his campaign chest. There is Sir Christopher Seal of *Put Out More*



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*Flags*, who dies shortly after one of his son Basil's escapades: "If it were conceivable that one who held the office of Chief Whip [of the Conservative Party] for a quarter of a century could be shocked at any spectacle of human depravity, it might have been thought that shame hastened his end."

The list could be extended. Of the fifty or sixty titled characters in Waugh's novels, it is hard to name more than two or three who can be said to be admirable. There is Lady Kilbannock, of whom the worst sin reported was sometimes mixing the red and white wines left over from a dinner party to make the rosé served at luncheon, and who befriends the destitute Virginia Troy, though drawing the line at her scheme to inveigle Guy Crouchback into remarrying her when she is pregnant by another man. There are "depths of Scotch propriety" in Kirstie—a phrase worth keeping in mind in view of Waugh's considerable Scotch heritage; "Life in London, life with Ian"—her husband, Lord Kilbannock, a cynical and self-serving journalist and PR man—"had not entirely atrophied her susceptibility to moral outrage." There are Lady Molly Meadowes, later Countess of Pastmaster, who treats the alcoholic and notorious Angela Lyne with compassion and, by laughing at her fiancé Peter, brings him around to a greater sense of reality, and Lady Cordelia Flyte, genuinely religious, if ineffectual. Peter, Lord Pastmaster, and Sir Alastair Digby-Vane-Trumpington, Baronet, start out as considerable scapegraces, but redeem themselves during the war, where Alastair is killed in action. But of the great majority of Waugh's upper-class characters there are few who cannot be described as either nonentities, fools, dupes, figures of fun, insufferable, crooked, or cads. Every reader will have his own candidate as the most contemptible among them. My own is Lady Brenda Last of *A Handful of Dust*, who not only cuckolds her loving and innocent husband with the repulsive John Beaver, but, assisted by her solemnly ridiculous brother Lord St. Cloud, devises an ingenious scheme to rob her husband blind in order to secure Beaver for her, an action even more caddish than Lady Metroland's treatment of Paul Pennyfeather.

The novel of Waugh's whose titled characters have contributed something to the legend of his snobbery, because it is, unfortunately, the one most often read, often the only one that has been read, or at least known through its diluted television version, is of course *Brideshead Revisited*. Here perhaps Lawrence's "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" has its most direct application. Waugh here does give an impression of wanting to convey something of the glamor of high rank and rich possessions, by presenting the story through the eyes of Charles Ryder, who, in the beginning at any rate, seems dazzled by them (he is, after all, only twenty).

Yet if the reader can stand outside and look at the Flyte family objectively, there is not all that much to admire. Lord Marchmain, after presumably respectable service in the First World War, retires from all useful activity and withdraws to a palazzo in Venice with his mistress to squander the family fortune. His deserted Marchioness, a castrating female if there ever was one, consoles herself by devoting her energies ostentatiously to her own brand of religion and establishing an emotional tyranny over her children that results in the psychological destruction of Sebastian and perhaps in Cordelia's inability to realize her undoubted potential. The favorite occupation of the heir to the marquessate, the Earl of Brideshead, is collecting matchboxes. Lady Julia seems to regret that her Roman Catholicism prevents her from marrying one of "the young princes"—George V's sons, the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, and the Dukes of Gloucester and Kent, who, as potential heirs to the throne, could legally marry only Protestants—and, for what seem entirely worldly motives, marries the upwardly mobile Canadian money grubber and rising politician Rex Mottram (Beaverbrook again?). On the fringes of the story are "Boy," Viscount Mulcaster, a moron, and his sister Lady Celia, Ryder's wife, a bitch only slightly less poisonous than Lady Brenda Last—Celia at least does not try to rob Charles.

It is perhaps the salvation of *Brideshead Revisited* from the charge of gross sentimentality that from time to time a dissentient voice breaks in, a kind of critical Greek chorus—the voice of the aesthete Anthony Blanche (Ambrose Silk plays a similar role in *Put Out More Flags*). Anthony's sharp, independent vision penetrates Lady Marchmain's thick armor of pretended piety: "She keeps a small gang of enslaved and emaciated prisoners for her exclusive enjoyment. *She sucks their blood.* . . . They never escape once she's



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had her teeth into them. It is witchcraft. There's no other explanation." Sebastian, though in thrall to her, sees through her too: "Of course, Mummy would give me anything I asked for." "Then why don't you ask her for a proper allowance?" "Oh, Mummy likes everything to be a present. She's so sweet." And "Mummy tried to explain it [the separation from Lord Marchmain] to the three eldest of us so that we wouldn't hate Papa. I was the only one who didn't. I believe she wishes I did." And therefore, in spite of her ostentatious solicitude, Sebastian knows that she hates *him*. Yet for all the show of affection between Sebastian and his father, Lord Marchmain seems to have displayed little real concern for his son and done nothing to help him with his serious problems. Lady Marchmain remains in full control. "When did it start?" Charles asks—that is, the campaign to separate Sebastian from Charles and send him to live under the supervision of Monsignor Bell. "Oh, it's been going on. Mummy's very clever you know," says Sebastian, and again, "Mummy only sees what suits her."

Anthony Blanche sees through Sebastian. His brutal but just judgment on him brings up with a shock the reader who has been beguiled by Ryder's engaging picture of him: "With that very murky background, what could he do except set up as being simple and charming, particularly as he isn't very well endowed in the Top Storey? . . . It's one of Sebastian's less lovable qualities that he always gives the impression of being led on—like a little horse at a circus." And indeed Sebastian, to protect something of his individuality from his mother's domination, has become an expert dissembler, even a sneak thief, as with Rex Mottram's winnings at cards and Anthony's clothes, and a blackmailer, as with Mr. Samgrass.

*Brideshead Revisited* was not Waugh's favorite novel. In 1950 he wrote to Graham Greene, "I re-read *Brideshead* and was appalled. . . . I am going to spend the summer re-writing it," and in its revised edition many of the more embarrassingly lush passages are eliminated or toned down. Waugh's preface to that edition says nothing about plot and characterization in the novel, but it does say a great deal applauding the post-war revival of interest in the great masterpieces of architecture that adorn the English countryside. Waugh's earliest interest had been not the craft of words but the visual arts, an interest


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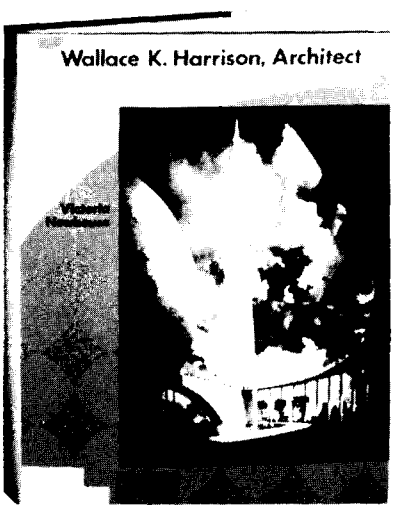


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that never left him. Perhaps the real hero of the novel is that which plays its title role, Brideshead Castle itself, for which Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor's great work of art, Castle Howard, is correctly cast in the screen version. When Charles first encounters its baroque splendor, he says, "I felt a whole new system of nerves alive within me, as though the water that spurted and babbled among its stones was indeed a life-giving spring." Perhaps Sebastian, Julia, and the rest take on the importance they do only because they are, as it were, by-products of it.

That Waugh's characters of highest rank, with a very few exceptions, are presented as objects of disparagement, does not mean, of course, that he is dogmatically committed, like, say, Priestley (and to some extent Dickens), to exalt the virtues of the socially obscure and less affluent. To be sure, he draws from their ranks some engaging and admirable characters: Nanny Hawkins, who gives the Flyte children the un-self-serving affection Lady Marchmain is incapable of; Mr. and Mrs. Florin, who take devoted care of the simple-witted Colonel Blount; the poverty-stricken fox-farming Lasts, who in no way resent the quirks of primogeniture that have made Tony the heir to Hetton. At the same time Waugh gives us petty would-be crooks like the Cuthberts, who try to evict their loyal, longtime tenant Mr. Crouchback and are astounded when he responds by treating them with generosity ("Somehow his mind seems to work different than yours and mine," says the baffled Mr. Cuthbert); the obnoxious and pitiable Hooper and Trimmer; the preposterous Atwater. Most important, Waugh often depicts decent untitled people of respectable education and family background: Guy Crouchback and his father, William Boot, Tony Last, Scott-King, Cedric Lyne, Barbara Sothill, Colonel and Mrs. Tickeridge, to mention some—

> pious and honourable people . . . people who had represented their country in foreign places and sent their sons to die for her in battle, people of decent and temperate life, uncultured, unaffected, unembarrassed, unassuming, unambitious people, of independent judgment and marked eccentricities, kind people who cared for animals and the deserving poor, brave and rather unreasonable people. . . .

That is not too inaccurate a description of Waugh's own family background. But when Waugh wishes to subject a character to devastating satire, he confers on him or her a title of rank; there can be, statistically, very few British writers who have created more lords, ladies, baronets, and knights for the purpose of pillorying them. That is the evidence of the text, and it is up to those who insist on Waugh's "snobbery" as the first essential for comprehension of his work as a novelist to explain it away.

The purpose of this essay is not to deal with the question of whether Waugh's personal behavior requires that he be stigmatized as a snob. This is a matter that, if it were worthwhile, could be argued about interminably. But I'd like briefly to make three points. First, if snobbery is closely allied to the politics of the British Conservative (often called Tory) Party, as its opponents frequently maintain, Waugh can be acquitted of such guilt by association. To be sure, he detested the rival socialist Labour Party, describing its tenure of office after World War II as "the Attlee-Cripps terror." But he constantly abuses the Conservative leader Winston Churchill, not only for the "sham Augustanism" of his writings and speeches, but for much in his conduct of the war—his betrayal, as Waugh saw it, of the Catholic loyalists in Yugoslavia, and especially his initial crime of having entered into an alliance with Stalinist Russia. That, of course, is the central theme of Waugh's great war trilogy, *Sword of Honour*: what had begun for Guy Crouchback (and Waugh) as a noble crusade against the forces of evil in the modern world degenerates into "a sweaty tug-of-war between teams of indistinguishable louts." On the news of the German invasion of her recent ally Russia, Churchill remarked, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons." Waugh would not.

Churchill's crown prince and successor, Anthony Eden, is invariably "the Jerk." The Earl of Halifax, formerly Lord Irwin, Chamberlain's Foreign Secretary and Churchill's competitor for the prime ministership in 1940, is dismissed by Lord Marchmain as "a mediocre fellow." Harold Macmillan fares no better: "I was staying with him in Naples in 1944 when he got the news that Churchill & Roosevelt had consented to the destruction of (Catholic) Lithuania. He showed obvious satisfaction,



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saying, 'Well, that's one problem the less.' " R. A. Butler, Macmillan's rival for the Conservative leadership, is "sub-human . . . squinny-eyed, awkward, given to horrible outbursts of 'Yo ho ho.' " To turn to those in the United States who are labeled "conservatives," when William F. Buckley tried to persuade Waugh to contribute to his *National Review*, Waugh snubbed him unmercifully. Buckley was at the time busy defending Senator Joseph McCarthy. Waugh replied to him, "McCarthy is certainly regarded by most Englishmen as a regrettable figure," and writes to a friend, "He [Buckley] has been showing me great & unsought attention *lately*. . . . *Has he been supernaturally guided* to bore me?"

It is interesting that late in George Orwell's life Waugh came to be on friendly terms with him; earlier Waugh had printed high praise of him. Orwell of course described himself as a socialist, although he was harshly rebuked by more thoroughgoing left-wingers for his condemnation in *Homage to Catalonia* of Communist atrocities in Spain. The last thing Orwell planned to write, though death prevented him, was a study of Waugh, using him, Orwell's latest biographer writes, "as an example of the Marxist fallacy that art can only be good if it is progressive"—in the leftist political sense presumably. (It is wryly amusing that Harry Pollitt, leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain, reviewing *The Road to Wigan Pier* in the *Daily Worker*, wrote of the Old Etonian Orwell, "If ever snobbery had its hallmark placed on it, it is by Mr. Orwell. . . . The chief thing that worries Mr. Orwell is the 'smell' of the working class.") It is also interesting that two of the very few novelists of his own time to whom Waugh gives the highest praise are Christopher Isherwood and Angus Wilson, both avowedly homosexual, non-Christian, and politically "liberal." Elsewhere Waugh satirizes Isherwood ("Pimpernell"), along with his friend "Parsnip" (Auden), for his flight to America in 1939. But such personal foibles do not interfere with Waugh's admiration of his artistry.

Second, Conor Cruise O'Brien, reviewing Martin Stannard's biography favorably in the *New York Review of Books* (February 8, 1988), depicts Waugh as someone of a lower social class vainly trying to win acceptance by the "nobs." O'Brien selects Alfred Duff Cooper as a paradigm. To suggest that Waugh sucked up to Cooper is absurd: the two detested each other. The fact is that Waugh's and Cooper's backgrounds were quite similar. Cooper was the son of a successful medical practitioner, not very different in social standing from Waugh's father, a successful and respected publisher. True, Cooper's mother was one of the parvenu Scottish Duffs of Muldavit. *They* strove in vain to be accepted as a branch of the ancient Clan Macduff (see Sir Iain Moncreiffe's erudite *The Highland Clans*). However, Queen Victoria's marrying an unprepossessing granddaughter to a wealthy Duff gave the family a title. Cooper increased his publicity value by marrying (after some hassling with her father) a daughter of the Duke of Rutland, herself no mean publicity collector. The marriage no doubt helped Cooper in his struggles, recorded in his autobiography *Old Men Forget*, to rise in the world of politics, though he never quite succeeded in reaching its highest level.

Lady Diana Cooper, unlike her husband, became a great friend of Waugh. They exchanged affectionate letters for many years, and Waugh immortalized her in his novels as the clever and charming *intrigante*, "Mrs. Stitch." (Her husband, the ineffectual Algy, Minister of Imperial Defence—Cooper at the time was Secretary of State for War—is given the kiss of death in that "Labour members loved him.") Lady Diana enjoyed the publicity Waugh gave her, even signing her letters "Stitch," though Mrs. Stitch's activities are sometimes deplorable.

Along with many naive Americans, the Irishman O'Brien seems to regard the British peerage with some awe, certainly to a degree greater than Waugh's, perhaps equating it with the privileged French aristocracy depicted in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The fact is that its ranks are highly flexible and heterogeneous. Titles are readily bestowed on successful politicians, businessmen, artists, actors, and writers, not to mention cricketers and jockeys. (Waugh was offered the dignity of Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and declined it.) The dividing line between the British professional and intellectual middle class, to which Waugh—and Cooper—belonged, and the "aristocracy" is nebulous, and the former (certainly not Waugh) does not necessarily display reverence toward the latter. Waugh had no reason to feel ashamed of his ancestry, and there is no



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hint of such shame in his fine autobiography *A Little Learning*; his great-great-grandfather Lord Cockburn, a distinguished judge and man of letters—the title is a judicial not a peerage one—is a more honored name in Scottish history than the Duffs of Muldavit.

It might be added that even novelists from proletarian backgrounds who attain kudos and wealth by recording proletarian lives have not been averse, after they have "made it," to enjoying the delights of upper-class life. Arnold Bennett reveled in yachts and chauffeured limousines (Waugh takes a sly dig at him in *Decline and Fall*). H. G. Wells included among his numerous mistresses a double countess, "Elizabeth," Gräfin von Arnim, later Countess Russell, and the Russian Baroness Budberg. When J. B. Priestley viciously accused Waugh of trying in vain to pass himself off as a landed country gentleman, and consequently suffering the mental breakdown described in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, Waugh was able to retort, "Mr. Priestley was at my age a landed proprietor on a scale by which my own modest holding is a peasant's patch." Priestley's friend Malcolm Muggeridge records a visit in 1949 to his "huge house on the Isle of Wight, with 2,000 acres." Even Norman Mailer was once (briefly) the son-in-law of a duke (Argyll), and hence a "nob" of the same class as Duff Cooper.

Finally, we might consider some of the ancillary manifestations, according to Stannard, of Waugh's snobbishness. "He abhorred 'plastics, Picasso, sunbathing, and jazz.' He despised the telephone. For years he refused to have a radio; television was insufferable. He dressed expensively, often in outrageously loud cloth. . . . The sign on the gates of his country houses was lucidly snubbing; 'No Admittance on Business.' " Let aspiring novelists take heed if they don't want to be denounced for snobbery. Prefer plastic shoes to leather. Learn to love Picasso, sunbathing, and jazz. Be sure to get in your mandatory five hours a day or whatever the national average is before the tube. Get cheap suits off the rack and avoid loud patterns, even in the country, where Waugh used to wear them. Don't hire a secretary, as businessmen, lawyers, and doctors do, to screen time-wasting telephone calls—answer them all yourself. Don't put up signs reading "No Solicitors," but hospitably welcome every door-to-door salesman who says he's on business, or even, as poor Lord Noel-Buxton did, that he's a member of the House of Lords.

Stannard seems to be recommending a "lifestyle" that might have been designed by the "image adviser" to a candidate for public office. Another reviewer of Stannard's book, who takes a much less sympathetic view of it and has a much better acquaintance with Waugh's life and writings than O'Brien, sums it up by suggesting that Stannard may be "unthinkingly reflecting attitudes formed by the malicious and highly inaccurate profiles of earlier decades," and urges, "Surely the time has come for criticism to give up grubbing for evidence of snobbery, brutality, bigotry, racism, and now duplicity in events that might, or might not, have happened, and to turn its attention to examining critically what did happen and in what circumstances"—and to actually reading Waugh's writings. One hesitates to reply to Stannard's indictment of Waugh's snobbery with so mild an expression as "Up to a point, Lord Copper"; one is tempted to use old Mr. Ryder's almost equally famous phrase, "*Such* a lot of nonsense."

## Disposing of the Body

RECOGNIZING BIOGRAPHY. *By William H. Epstein. University of Pennsylvania Press. $29.95.*

Reviewed by MARNIE JONES

There are certain kinds of writing that exclude the vast majority of readers: the "hard" sciences, such as quantum physics, come to mind; and the various branches of medicine—oncology, for example. These forms of writing exclude us for a legitimate reason. They depend upon a privileged vocabulary; but it is a vocabulary connected to the real world. I can consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* to learn the language of electrons or tumors. Until recently, the language of literary criticism had been accessible to readers outside the university who loved literature. With the rise, one might even say the domination, of critical theory over literary studies during the past ten years, the language of literary criti-

✪ MARNIE JONES is assistant professor of English at the University of North Florida.



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cism has excluded readers who share a passion for literature—readers within the university as well as those without.

Why is this kind of writing so awful? That was the question that came to mind as I read William Epstein's *Recognizing Biography*. Let me begin by saying that I approached this book hoping to learn more about the art that I appreciate and the craft that I practice. For I have a professional as well as a personal interest in the art of life-writing, having written my Ph.D. dissertation on biography, having published essays about biography, and currently being at work on a biography. But William Epstein excludes even so interested a reader as myself.

Epstein quite unself-consciously notes that James Field Stanfield's 1813 book *An Essay on the Study of Biography*, the first critical treatment of the genre, was blasted by a contemporary critic "for its 'almost unremitting and overwhelming parade of scientific phraseology,' which 'is as prolix and indefinite, and cloudy, for the most part, as it is artificial and academical.' " "This is not," observes Epstein, "unfair criticism." Written one hundred and seventy-four years later, *Recognizing Biography* is equally unremitting in its "parade of scientific phraseology." Epstein assumes the post-modern ironic position that sees no validity for normal linguistic procedures. These theorists characteristically argue their case in the most tortured prose—and for good reason; if such ideas were stated clearly they would be seen as untenable. George Orwell put it best almost fifty years ago when he wrote that the English language "becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." Epstein's book represents that theoretical writing which is so elusive that it excludes all but the already initiated. Such involuted rhetoric assumes authority by virtue of its unintelligibility. There is no sense, in reading this book, of an author doing his best to make his case persuasive to the uninitiated.

The difficulty with *Recognizing Biography* begins as soon as one tries to make sense of its central term. Epstein's work runs parallel to efforts by Hayden White and Louis O. Mink to determine a poetics of history. He asks an important question, one that has shadowed biography since the ancients began writing the lives of noble Grecians and Romans, What is biography? How does it differ from history? But consider Epstein's account of his subject: in his first sentence he defines recognition as "the complex activity of reading and analysis associated with the cognitive experiencing and re-experiencing of biography." He distinguishes this complex act—and his reader has not yet begun to appreciate its complexity—from "literary recognition (or, more commonly, literary response) and historical recognition (more commonly, historical understanding)." The critic would have done better, one can't help but think, to rely upon the "more commonly" understood concepts of literary response and historical understanding. At least then one could more directly determine that this work considers the differences between life-writing and its sister genres: literature and history.

Epstein acknowledges on his second page that "the term 'recognition' or 'recognizing,' . . . supports various meanings." I will limit my consideration to what he calls "its most common sense": "the perceptual process of classifying within conventional categories." He means, I suppose, the process by which a reader comes to know a genre as one particular genre and not another. But then Epstein goes on and I become less sure that I understand his use of even "the most common sense" of the term: "Hence recognition is the informal authority genre assumes as it collects and separates information, as it particularizes the General by fractionalizing 'Literature constituted as its own Absolute (and as the Absolute of all discourse and all writing.)'" The quotation Epstein relies on to further garble his sentence comes from Jean-Jacques Chartin, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Samuel Weber in their article "Appendix: situating the colloquium 'Genre,'" published in a journal called *Glyph*. It certainly does not clarify his definition, but rather it seems admirably to make the point against writing by committee, especially French committees. Can genre be said to "assume"—that is to say, to take on—authority, whether informally or not? How does anything particularize the general by fractionalizing? And by fractionalizing what? Fractionalizing "Literature constituted as its own Absolute"? He has thoroughly muddled the issue. Harold Bloom's assertion that "clarity,"



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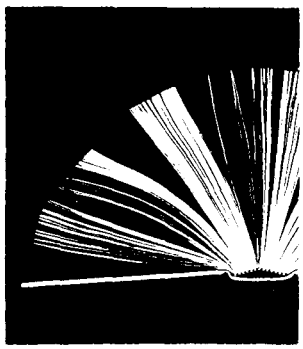

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is, after all, "mainly a trope for philosophical reductiveness or a dreary literal-mindedness" does not persuade one to forgo thinking clarity one of the writer's cardinal virtues. There is yet a second and a third definition, both equally prolix, but by now you have the general idea.

"Recognition" is not a Derridean non-word, such as *différance,* but it is a deconstructive instrument in that, once appropriated from common usage, its multiple meanings require it to deconstruct itself as well as the biographies under consideration. (Are you still with me?) In appropriately opaque terms, Epstein acknowledges his indebtedness to the post-structural point of view:

> I should mention specifically here the "corruption of blood" visited upon me by my affinity for the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, with whom I have allied myself in nearly every chapter. The possibility that I have negotiated an "unholy alliance," both between these two major twentieth-century theorists and between structuralist or post-structuralist perspectives and biographical recognition, is raised, if not tested, throughout this book. Indeed, the notion of a "post-modern poetics" of biographical recognition is itself problematical, a slippery concept which, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu (another contemporary theorist with whom I seek consanguinity), can only be *mis*recognized as a representational formalism displacing and inadequately articulating a discursive practice which is always changing.

The problem with much of Epstein's work—and much post-structuralist theory—is precisely his willingness to find his own concepts slippery. One might even say he oils them down himself. His use of the word *notion* I find marvelously apt, for what Epstein provides us with is a vague and imperfect idea. And if the concepts are slippery, so logically must be the writing. Post-structuralism's debt to Jacques Derrida is its embrace of the "indeterminable," "undecidable," "irreconcilable," and "contradictory" nature of meaning, or, as he would put it, the nature of the "signified." "All reading is misreading," as J. Hillis Miller sees it. All "recognition" is "*mis*-recognition," as Epstein has it.

Not only have literary texts become indeterminate, but our critical tools—ideas and the very language we use to express those ideas—have become interminate. Perry Meisel, setting his cards on the table, puts it this way: "All language is finally groundless." Epstein informs us that his "notions" (again that noun shimmering with self-doubt) of biographical recognition and generic framing are "as the saying goes, 'under erasure.'" Now you see them, now you don't. His generic frames "are only momentarily and provisionally privileged in and through my practice, which itself can be situated only in the mutual displacements and inadequacies of alternative articulations." I am not sure whose "articulations" Epstein finds inadequate, but I find his exceedingly so. Notice how hesitantly the author makes claim for his own success: "In attempting to describe how my articulation of generic framing can guide our recognition of biography, this book will (because it cannot avoid doing so) disrupt, deform, and de-authorize the rule-governed relationships (the so-called generic conventions) by and through which the 'law' of biography is and has been understood."

Epstein begins to report his own thinking process while writing the book, but ultimately gives up: "This desire to 'center' myself in my own nostalgia is as likely (or unlikely) to clarify, rationalize, or justify my work as any other statement I make in this book." Thus, we are left with an author equally confident and unconfident that every statement in the book will be equally useful and useless. That double disavowal exempts him from clarity and reason throughout his work. Epstein acknowledges "my occasional lapses in rhetoric," which this reader, at least, finds more than occasional, but which he "(attribute[s] to the deeply engrained, unavoidable critical practice of 'making claims')." He accords his own theory "only a temporary and provisional privilege"; thus, he wants us to remember that he simultaneously disavows each claim as he makes it. The lesson, therefore, is that as soon as he says a thing we are, as he suggests, to erase it.

Biography may well have been the last literary genre to resist theory. "Read no history: nothing but biography," advised Benjamin Disraeli in 1832, "for that is life without theory." Disraeli's maxim seems to have held true until quite recently. It was Leon Edel who called the genre into question: we must, he argued, pay as much attention to how the life is written as to how the life was lived. The genre has greatly benefited, it seems to me, from such scrutiny. But biography, because of



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the very nature of the beast, is unlikely to succumb to Epstein's brand of literary gamesmanship. As the biographer painstakingly constructs a life, such critics ardently deconstruct the text. A theoretical point of view that doubts the existence of a reality beyond the text and doubts the existence of the text beyond the act of literary interpretation gives free license to the critic. What can deconstruction possibly contribute to the mystery of biography? Nothing, it would seem, because deconstructionist critics ignore the mysteries of the art by dazzling the reader with their own sleight of hand.

Consider the case of Lytton Strachey. Of the four biographers Epstein considers—Walton, Johnson, Boswell, and Strachey—Strachey might be said to have achieved what Epstein aspires to. Epstein, like Strachey, seeks "to spoil, infect, adulterate, pervert, debase, defile, bribe, and dissolve the composition, purity, integrity, fidelity, law, text, and language of biography." Strachey was, after all, the consummate artist in his attack on all that the Victorians held dear. But in Epstein's hands Strachey himself all but disappears. Epstein persuasively demonstrates that "lines, straight roads, paths or ways" have served as metaphors for human lives in Dante, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Sterne. He shows that the "life course," or "the 'straight line of moral rectitude,' " represents a characteristic strategy for the plot of English biography that was well institutionalized by the Victorians. Lytton Strachey, however, "ironically and aesthetically 'curves' or skews these straight lines." All this makes a good deal of sense.

But when Epstein invokes the "gospel" of Foucault's "bio-power," good sense vanishes. He quotes Foucault as saying that "bio-power [was] one of the primordial forms of class consciousness [in] the affirmation of the body, [which] ensure[s] the strength, endurance, and secular proliferation of that body through the organization of a deployment of sexuality." How can sexuality be said to be first organized and then deployed? In Epstein's hands "bio-power" is the force behind nineteenth-century biography: "Appropriated by the nation-state of industrial capitalism as an articulation of its knowledge-power, nineteenth-century biography explicitly calculates the probabilities of life, ensures the strength, endurance and proliferation of the middle-class body, and plots the trajectory of this body in cultural discourse." Thus Epstein, by way of Foucault, totally dehumanizes how biographies are written. The likes of John G. Lockhart and James A. Froude, it would seem, were simply pawns of capitalism's anthropomorphic ability to express its "knowledge-power," so that *The Life of Sir Walter Scott* and *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London* could plot the "trajectory" of middle-class bodies.

Epstein's reliance upon military metaphors casts both biographer and biographical subject as passive constructions. "What would happen," Epstein asks knowing full well his answer, "if the *deployment* of this strategy for recognizing the *trajectory* of the body were to come under a subversive administration exercising a bio-power that seeks to 'de-actualize' the 'cultural reality' endorsed in the Victorian doctrine of pursuits?" (Italics added.) The answer to the question, of course, is *Eminent Victorians*. Who is it, one wonders, who deploys this strategy? Regardless of its subject, how can the verb *deploys* be precise? *Trajectory* fits nicely with Epstein's notion that Strachey curves the straight line of the traditional nineteenth-century "life-course," since it signals the curving path of a projectile, or, in fact, any body moving by another's force, but it hardly provides a useful explanation about how biographies come to be written or read. The biographer himself is described in complementary terms: Lytton Strachey was, during the writing of *Eminent Victorians* "a strange body through which eccentric modern ideas—decadent aestheticism, pacifism, homoeroticism—were being projected." Again, Epstein dehumanizes the artist: Strachey becomes merely a passive body through which Foucault's forces move. "As institution," Paul de Man once wrote, "the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person, have disappeared." Apparently, the news now is, so has the biographer's subject. Speaking of the revolution Florence Nightingale initiated in nursing, Epstein observes of her: "This capacity (indeed, this need, this desire) to transgress and transform conventional class and gender expectations, to displace a disreputable career with an alternative trajectory that interrogates conventional cultural arrangements, prepares her to re-arrange the known world." Granted, Florence Nightingale did overthrow cultural and gender expectations, but could she be said to "re-arrange the



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known world"? Epstein traces Strachey's double vision of her "ministry": from the woman who nursed men's bodies to the administrator who advised governments: "Constantly displacing each other, these various modes of 'ministering' describe a trajectory that both reinforces and subverts the traditional Victorian life-course, the conventional path of submissive devotion and familiar duty expected of a woman. . . ." With Lytton Strachey and Florence Nightingale both out of the way, the critic becomes his own subject. This leads inevitably to self-indulgence on the critic's part and exhaustion on the part of the reader.

Knowing the post-structuralist's fondness for linguistic sex play, it is hardly surprising that Epstein, with Strachey as his subject and Foucault as his literary blocker, should cast all this in explicitly sexual terms. Epstein retells Michael Holroyd's account of Lytton Strachey's appearance before the Hampstead Tribunal. Strachey sought exemption from the 1916 conscription act as a conscientious objector. The tribunal's military representative asked, " 'Then tell me, Mr. Strachey, what would you do if you saw a German soldier attempting to rape your sister?' Lytton turned and forlornly regarded each of his sisters in turn. Then he confronted the Board once more and answered with gravity: 'I should try and interpose my own body.' " That, says Epstein, is precisely what Strachey does as biographer of these cultural icons: "It is through a reading of *Eminent Victorians* which habitually returns to this cross-examination between a militant administrator posing awkward questions and a homosexual pacifist interposing his body into even more embarrassing answers that we shall (re-) emplot the generic frame 'recognizing the life-course.' " If Epstein claims that he, as literary theorist, wants to "adulterate, pervert, [and] debase" the purity of biography, it is hardly surprising that he casts Lytton Strachey as the sodomite whose penchant for "the rear attack" "ironically . . . skews [the] straight lines" of the "life-course."

*Eminent Victorians* reveals to Epstein, as he concludes, "that, in a post-Einsteinian universe, the desire and the pursuit of the whole can be recognized only in the mutual deformations of local curvatures. We seem to inhabit simultaneously a land beyond and a world lost, an entangled country in which a succession of rising and falling eminences re-marks a limitless diversity of obscure paths." Epstein quite accurately, it seems to me, characterizes Strachey's Florence Nightingale "as a prisoner of her myth." But isn't William Epstein the prisoner of his rhetoric?

If the language of literary criticism continues to exclude thinking readers, the loss will be immeasurable. It is a different thing entirely when medicine and science depend upon exclusionary language. For, their words and ideas that we find so foreign are firmly rooted to reality. They must be because their work depends upon their connection to the natural world, to the human body. Imagine your surgeon doubting there was a reality behind the word *tumor*. Their language must serve them. That is the difference. Current theoretical thinking in literary circles has it that language does not serve us but rather we serve it. Thus, it logically follows that the language of post-structuralist theory has become disassociated from any reality. If that has been somehow easy to accept when the critic treats the "texts" of Percy Shelley or Virginia Woolf, the reality that biography bases itself upon requires us to see such criticism for what it is: self-indulgent, enervating, even cowardly. It seems fitting somehow, if, to appropriate Epstein's military vocabulary, a last stand against such criticism could be fought at the intersection between art and life known as "biography."

## Jane Made Unplain

JANE ELLEN HARRISON: THE MASK AND THE SELF. *By Sandra J. Peacock. Yale University Press. $27.50.*

Reviewed by MARY R. LEFKOWITZ

Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928) was one of the first women academics to make a name for herself in the English-speaking world; along with Gilbert Murray and F. M. Cornford, she helped to describe the features of "primitive"

✪ MARY R. LEFKOWITZ, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Wellesley, is author of *Women in Greek Myth*. Her essays about women, ancient and modern, have been published in THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, the *Partisan Review*, and the *T.L.S.*



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## Machine, Metaphor, and the Writer
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This brilliant and far-reaching comparative, interdisciplinary work explores the impact of the machine on the literary mind. The author offers powerful analyses of texts by French, Irish, Japanese, Israeli, German, Polish, and American authors who were deeply affected by the changes in their lives and times. The realization of the increasing domination of the machine catalyzed and mobilized each author into action. Each spoke out to reveal both the corrosive and beneficial factors of the environmental and mechanical alterations taking place around them. *272 pp. July 1989 $27.50*

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*Donald Pearce*

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*David Weisburd*

The 1967 victory brought the bulk of the biblical "Land of Israel" territories under Israeli control and rekindled traditional sentiments for Jewish sovereignty in *all* these territories. These sentiments became a powerful political force within Israel and provide a growing potential for violence. This book examines those Israelis who are most identified with this violence and provides an innovative and thought-provoking approach to violence that is rationalized and legitimized with reference to norms and values. It suggests that vigilantism and antigovernment violence will increase, at the same time the Israeli government will find it increasingly difficult to respond to and control settler deviance. *208 pp. July 1989 $22.50*

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religion in ancient Greece, and give proper recognition to the powers of the non-Olympian gods and divine presences. One of the first women to satisfy all the requirements for a degree in the classics at Cambridge, Harrison initially made her living by lecturing on Greek art, until she was able to return to Newnham as a research fellow, writing the books and articles on Greek religion that were to have such lasting influence.

Along with her extraordinary command of the evidence, artistic, archaeological, and literary, Jane Harrison had a distinctive style, vivid and personal; whatever her topic, she made the reader as aware of her presence as if she herself were in the room, lecturing or teaching. She engages the reader in a conversation, asking and answering questions, usually directly, by speaking of "we" and "you," but also indirectly, by passing judgment when one might not expect it, characterizing an ancient writer's style, or seizing on the details that struck her contemporaries as remarkable. But perhaps most surprising (and refreshing) to modern readers is the way in which she avoids jargon and generalization; in order to describe a complex concept, she moves from detail to detail, if necessary quoting a verse of English poetry to fix in the reader's mind some sense of the emotional or religious significance of an ancient practice.

Because of her interest in popular religion, Jane Harrison's works are sometimes misunderstood as offering support for the notion that the cult of the mother goddesses was suppressed by a new patriarchal religion; but Harrison knew the evidence too well to imagine that male divinities ever lacked authority. Nonetheless, she was one of the first scholars writing in English to attribute to goddesses like Demeter and Persephone the importance they had throughout antiquity, and to write about the relation between that mother and daughter pair with the sympathy that the ancient poets themselves expressed.

Harrison's friends and colleagues and she herself realized that she was extraordinary. Harrison wrote her own *Reminiscences*; her pupil Jessie Stewart constructed a *Portrait* from Harrison's own letters. Although Harrison destroyed most of the letters in her possession, her friends kept and carefully preserved the letters she wrote to them. Her contemporaries make it clear that the academic and personal sides of her life could not easily be separated. Gilbert Murray spoke of "her vitality, her passion for the things of the intellect, her ever ready sympathy, and the unbounded generosity with which she estimated the work of others and more than repaid every contribution to her own."

Harrison, like other women scholars at the time, never married. She herself (at least in retrospect) did not regard her fate as a misfortune:

> By what miracle I escaped marriage, I do not know, for all my life long I fell in love. But on the whole, I am glad. I do not doubt that I lost much, but I am quite sure I gained more. Marriage, for a woman at least, hampers the two things that made life to me glorious, friendship and learning. In man it was always the friend, not the husband, that I wanted. The role of wife and mother is no easy one; with my head full of other things I might dismally have failed.

Instead, Harrison seems to have settled on what for her and for many other gifted women was clearly the more attractive option, a celibate and comfortable existence in the sheltered ambience of a women's college:

> I have a natural gift for community life. It seems to me sane and civilized and economically right. I like to live spaciously, but rather plainly, in large halls with great spaces and quiet libraries. I like to wake in the morning with a sense of a great silent garden around me. . . . If I had been rich I should have founded a learned community for women, with vows of consecration and a beautiful rule and habit; as it is, I am content to have lived many years of my life in a college.

Given Harrison's own attitude, and the extent to which she was able to talk about her own feelings, it seems strange that modern biographers would seek to discover indications of some deeper underlying, unexpressed unhappiness, and even of deprivation. It is true that, unlike many of her contemporaries, Harrison seemed to require both companionship and support from male as well as female friends. Certainly she suffered acutely when her closest male friends married. According to Sandra Peacock, her biographer, the determining factors in Harrison's life were the death of her mother when she was five, which brought to Jane "an effortless Oedipal victory" that allowed her to have her father to



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herself—only to lose him again, five years later, when he married his children's governess and started a second family. This defeat, Peacock argues, made Jane permanently suspicious of sexual relationships, and eager to have male friends rather than lovers.

But Peacock concentrates so hard on the possible consequences of the shattered father-daughter relationship that she fails to give proper emphasis to an even more remarkable fact: Mr. Harrison paid to send his daughter to the best school for young women in England (Cheltenham Ladies' College), and in an era when few girls were given a secondary education, and then supported her in taking the even more revolutionary step of attending one of the first university colleges for women, Newnham Hall in Cambridge, which had been founded only a few years earlier, in 1871. Whatever Jane Harrison may have felt about her father's "abandonment" of her (and it is her biographer, not Jane, who speaks in those terms), he saw that she got the equivalent of a man's education. And resentment alone could not have sustained her long in the difficult course of study that she had adopted.

Peacock documents in detail the many emotional ups and downs of Harrison's career. Some resulted from broken friendships, others from an overly sensitive and responsive nature that caused her to weep at plays and avoid listening to music. She never advanced so far in her career as a man with the same talents might have done; nor had she been trained to have nor did she finally acquire the ordinary educated man's self-confidence in the face of setbacks. At the same time, Harrison managed to survive and to use her considerable talents and learning to produce a large scholarly oeuvre. Although it is tempting to focus on the emotional problems that many other women scholars have also experienced, and will continue to experience, Peacock might have had more to say about what sustained her throughout the various crises: her work and, to a lesser degree, the support of many friends.

It is easier to describe Jane Harrison's friends, like the Greek scholar Gilbert Murray or the companion of her later years, Hope Mirrlees, than it is to talk about her work, and perhaps too easy to think of work as compensation for "normal" emotion. But knowledge or (as Murray put it) "the things of the intellect" surely have as great an appeal for women as for men, not only because education can confer social status and political power, but because learning brings a lasting comfort and pleasure that compares rather favorably with the drudgery of housekeeping or office work. Harrison relied on her friends as much for intellectual as for emotional support. She was delighted to have the company of Francis Cornford, who was twenty-five years her junior, not only as a *cavaliere servente* but as a kind of academic alter ego, with whom she could discuss what mattered most to her in life, her work. When he could no longer devote his full attention to her, because of his marriage, Harrison became despondent; but then, after a period of depression and solitude, she soon acquired another young friend and admirer, her pupil Hope Mirrlees.

But Peacock is so concerned with describing the emotional side of Jane Harrison's life that she does not give sufficient emphasis to the intellectual power that propelled and sustained her in spite of all disappointments. Nor should her extraordinary intellectual and creative force be characterized as "channelling her fury into her work"; if that were all that were required, anyone could have written *Themis*. But Peacock, not unlike the writers of ancient lives of poets, seems determined to whittle down to normal size Harrison's exceptional academic achievement. She records in considerable detail Harrison's sentimental attachment to a teddy bear that she kept in her room, and trusted only to Hope Mirrlees. Peacock sees sexual significance in a drawing given by Frances Darwin to her fiancé Francis Cornford, depicting the engaged couple, Frances's father Frank and Jane Harrison each offering a pig as a sacrifice to Demeter in the celebration of the Mysteries at Eleusis. Peacock insists that in 1908, though Harrison in her discussion of the "pig of purification" makes no reference to it, that "all the members of the group would have been familiar with the Greek use of the pig as a symbol for female genitalia." Perhaps, as Walter Burkert has recently suggested, the Greeks may have thought of the pig as a substitute for a maiden sacrificial victim. But Frances Darwin is more likely to have intended simply to include Jane Harrison as a member of the engaged couple's immediate "family"; the drawing also shows that Frances had an intimate acquaintance



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with Harrison's and Cornford's scholarly interests.

Because she gives priority to Jane Harrison's emotional life, and suggests that Harrison used her work to define herself and to give order to her existence, Peacock offers only a summary account of Harrison's scholarship and the intellectual influences on her work. It would be interesting to know more about what Harrison read and when; Peacock notes that Harrison had read Jung and Freud, though not uncritically, but she does not comment on the debt Harrison herself expressed to "the less well known writings of the greatest of Russian philosophers Vladimir Soloviov" (1853–1900). Peacock notes that Harrison toward the end of her life learned Russian, "in order to escape" issues of conscience raised by the First World War; Peacock suggests that Harrison had a "romantic association" with the country of bears and forests and the Russian soul, but surely there were also intellectual reasons why a historian of religion would so late in life undertake to study so difficult a language and so remote a culture; in *Epilegomena* she cites Soloviov and uses a Russian phrase in her discussion of the concept of shame.

Perhaps Harrison, as Peacock claims, used her work to order the chaos she encountered in her own life, or in the larger world around her. But in putting on a brave face or "mask," and giving priority to her academic work, was Harrison behaving so very differently from any of her male contemporaries? It would be interesting to know to what extent solitude and withdrawal in fact aided Harrison's thinking and writing. Do "normal" relationships with other people necessarily confer happiness, as is so often assumed, especially on scholars like Harrison, who are by nature idiosyncratic? Of course it would be unreasonable to deny that Harrison's style and scholarly interests were to some extent affected by her being a woman—Harrison herself insisted that the body and soul could not be separated. But far more important, and ultimately more interesting than her sex, is the quality of her intelligence. Other women academics of her time have failed to make such a lasting impression on subsequent scholarship; we sing "America the Beautiful," but who now reads the critical works or poetry of Katharine Lee Bates (1859–1929)? Somehow, despite all the difficulties her sex and her society set in her way, Harrison managed to produce work that is still consulted. It is a shame that this detailed biography fails to give a full estimation of her work, especially since it is this aspect of her life that Harrison herself cared about most and wanted most to have remembered.

## Irony and Outrage

GIBBON'S SOLITUDE: THE INWARD WORLD OF THE HISTORIAN. *By W. B. Carnochan. Stanford University Press. $29.50.*

Reviewed by GUY DAVENPORT

"There is just appeared a truly classic work," Horace Walpole wrote the Reverend William Mason in February 1776, "a history, not majestic like Livy, nor compressed like Tacitus; not stamped with character like Clarendon; perhaps not so deep as Robertson's *Scotland* . . . not pointed like Voltaire, but as accurate as he is inexact; modest as he is *tranchant* and sly as Montesquieu without being so *recherché*. The style is as smooth as a Flemish picture. . . ." Walpole's opinion has been the world's; *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—the Augustan epic, filling the same space in its age as *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* did in theirs—is as "truly classic" as a work of literature can be.

Professor Carnochan begins his study of Gibbon's achievement by reminding us that we give the epoch to Johnson, not to Gibbon, perhaps because Johnson was a heroic figure and Gibbon is all but invisible. He was fat, timid, industrious; his genius flowed steadily into his great work. Johnson's genius, impeded by dilatoriness overcome by gigantic agonies of labor, seems to us to be more modern, closer to the literary center of gravity in English history that still quivers around the Romantic and Victorian *cultus* of sentiment and self-expression.

As for history itself, it has long ago con-

GUY DAVENPORT, who teaches English at the University of Kentucky, has most recently published *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon* and *Every Force Evolves a Form.*



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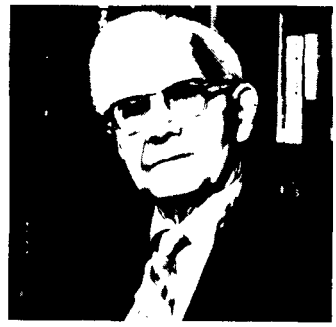

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signed Gibbon to historiography. He is as much an antique as his subject. The very effort of reading Gibbon does not fit in with the laziness and the habit of instant gratification of the way we teach now, or of the way we read.

So Professor Carnochan's first task is to find Gibbon for us. He conflates the interior and exterior Gibbon in a new and interesting way. Most of us are apt to have in our imaginations the roly-poly, self-confident, triumphantly skeptical Gibbon who was Lytton Strachey's hero. Displacing this caricature, Professor Carnochan approaches Gibbon through his admiration for a Renaissance sculpture, Lorenzo Lotti's "Jonah" in the Chigi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, in Rome. Gibbon thought it "the finest modern statue I have seen." It is a handsome, curly-haired athlete astride a rather leathery and collapsed whale, an iconographic variant of Arion on his dolphin, or an Eros. The figure is nude except for a length of cloth the ends of which are in Jonah's hands and which flows from his left shoulder down his back, and across his right thigh, making a stout bulge in its concealment of his genitals. Psychology has taught us that to hide is to display. Some interior symbol in Gibbon's imagination was responding to this Renaissance Jonah, whose fate was to be concealed before he could act, and whose ministry was to declare the fall of a city. But Gibbon had a monstrous swelling of the scrotum that tight eighteenth-century trousers defined for all to see, much as the rhetorical robe in Lorenzo's sculpture emphasizes that Jonah is young and male.

Carnochan's Gibbon is a writer wholly interior, a master spirit of his chosen art—history as richly expressed as a Renaissance work firmly grounded in classical origins but shaped by a modern spirit. Gibbon began his career as a critic who hated nonsense and velleities. These he found around him: in William Warburton's bogus theories and in received histories of Christianity.

The chapters in Carnochan's study devoted to Gibbon's preparation to be Rome's historian seem to me to be the best in the book. We watch Gibbon in a series of Cartesian decisions, always making the right choice. Would he write in French or English? Where would he begin, before or after Hadrian? Where would he stand? (The point of view in so vast a panorama was crucial.) Gibbon chose to remain in Rome, to unify the geography of his epic. (I've always felt that the one personal moment of the epic, the only time the diligent chronicler looks up from his quill and paper and smiles at us eye to eye, is when, late in the work, he himself realizes that he is one of the barbarians he is talking about in the mists of Britannia, remote from the Italian sun. It is the moment of *plenum,* when the outlines and eternal destiny of the empire are filled and fulfilled.)

Carnochan applies to his new Gibbon many recent skills of criticism. He takes from Erwin Panofsky the fact that we see on the concave surface of the retina; the farther back from the horizon we are, the more it curves. Perspective is ultimately a rondure, not the pinching in of a vanishing point. Gibbon knew this instinctively. It was long ago noticed that his sentences grow longer as he moves farther away from Rome. There is nothing indistinct in Gibbon; or, rather, he keeps to the one epic focus of indistinction throughout, so that remoteness of great distance—Mohamed, the East, the Rhineland—are as distinct as the streets of Rome.

Never has the imagination had such unity in literature as in *The Decline and Fall.* It is a splendid unity, and a tyrannical one: much had to be sacrificed to it. The space Braudel would occupy later, and the French *annalistes,* is never entered, so that an eighteenth-century reader would have had to turn to other sources to know the domestic life of the times, and would have had to supply that glorious history of the church that we know as the history of art and architecture, of poetry and music. Gibbon's Christianity is all irony and outrage, a map of infamy, and a dissection of credulity, superstition, and cruelty.

Gibbon's universe, as Carnochan notes, was "open." He had neither doctrine nor prejudice to be his guide. Like Hume, he doubted, he tested, he thought for himself. His scalpel was irony; his antiseptic, contempt. His voice remains even, judicious, mild through six fat volumes. He was not writing a romance; he was writing truth.

Professor Carnochan's real subject is the lonely integrity of this undertaking. The problems were immense: how to shape the actors as to character, how to sift through sources in Greek and Latin. At what pace was he to move



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through the centuries between us and the Antonines? How much of the story could be narrated sequentially? The plot is radial: Roman history was always a design of moving outward from a center. In the history Gibbon assumed we knew already that the pattern of centrifugal diffusion had been established: divide and conquer, rule as an administrator. The conquered were clients, not slaves. When Gibbon picked up this long history, the boundaries had just been fixed, and the effort was to civilize the world within them. But this order was momentary. It would prove to have the fluctuations of an amoeba, gathering in, spreading out anew. And it would become fibrous, until the empire needed two emperors, four, six. Human nature itself would change, over and over. Theodoric was a thousand psychological miles from Marcus Aurelius.

One can plausibly read Gibbon precisely for these character studies, letting the campaigns and councils, reorganizations and revolutions flow around. Gibbon's eye for character was as sharp as Voltaire's, but more patient, and more forgiving. He is at the opposite pole from Shakespeare and Plutarch. He is not interested in understanding human nature as tragic or comic. He is a moralist, and his scales weigh meanness and generosity, stamina and sloth, intelligence and stupidity. In the history of the church, it is the church's betrayal, or concealment of its own ideals, that he comes down upon hardest.

Professor Carnochan's best achievement is to keep before us the fact that history is art, and that Gibbon had a double task: to write accurate history and to make a work of art of it. It must be coherent, in one style, from one point of view, unified in one music, so to speak: in the same key throughout. "I believe," Carnochan says, "that the ironist should be judged according to the human consequences of his art. Does he shut his world down to interpretation or open it up?" This question makes us see the deferential articulateness of Gibbon's art. He poises all on an ironic point, observation by observation, allowing compassion (if you are so talented) or contempt (you are welcome to that, too) to vibrate in response.

At this point in his analysis, Professor Carnochan invokes Lucky's mad, incoherent speech in *Waiting for Godot*—a brilliant piece of theater the irony of which is congenial to us—and we feel for and with Lucky's hysterical outburst, something between the braying of an ill-treated ass (he is in a harness) and the just expression of all frustrations in Christian belief (*was* Christ God incarnate? Will he return? When? Has not all this become, by this time, a maddening farce?). Gibbon is in some sense, in the highest value we can appreciate in his consummate art, a little like Lucky. He has traced a thousand years of human history in its configurations of famine and wealth, conquest and superstitions, balances and collapses, and what are we to make of it?

Professor Carnochan might have added that Lucky is taken from the New Testament, where he is called Tychicus (meaning *fortunate* in Greek). He is Saint Paul's amanuensis, a writer by trade. His art is words, and their grammatical and spiritual order. Like Gibbon's.

## Court Scientists

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY ADVICE TO THE PRESIDENT, CONGRESS, AND JUDICIARY. *Edited by William T. Golden. Pergamon. $49.95. Paper, $24.95.*

Reviewed by JOEL E. COHEN

When the American Constitution was framed, scientific talents at the top levels of government were high. Thomas Jefferson was one of the first Americans to learn the calculus. Benjamin Franklin invented soda pop by dissolving carbon dioxide in water. The demands for governmental understanding of scientific and technical issues were low. The Constitution simply granted the Congress the power to "promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts" by protecting the rights of authors and inventors. Times have changed. Now national defense, AIDS, product liability, aging, energy supplies, smoking, agriculture, computers, surrogate mothers, the ozone hole, garbage, airport dynamite detectors, DNA fingerprinting, flu vaccine, space sta-

✪ JOEL E. COHEN is a professor of populations and head of the Laboratory of Populations at the Rockefeller University.



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tions, and global warming—all require informed judgments from the government of the United States, and all involve science and technology beyond that commonly taught in high school, or even in law school. How are these judgments formed, and how should they be formed?

Eighty-five timely, original essays in *Science and Technology Advice to the President, Congress, and Judiciary*, edited by William T. Golden, address the question: "What organizational structures should be utilized by the President, the Congress, and the Judiciary . . . to utilize available knowledge most effectively and to evaluate and respond to the diversity of opinions, and self-interests, in our world of change?"

Sixty-seven essays deal primarily with the president and the executive branch of government, eleven with the Congress, and seven with the judiciary. The authors include former President Gerald R. Ford, both of President Reagan's science advisers, science advisers of former presidents, members of Congress, federal judges, Nobel laureates, and many industrial and academic experts. These essays extend the scope of Golden's earlier collection, *Science Advice to the President* (1980). A promised companion volume will report in greater detail on how other countries arrange their science advising. The book largely skirts science advising at state and local levels.

The essays, written independently and highly diverse in outlook, suggest that federal officials can get scientific and technical advice, when they want it, through more channels than ever before. But scientific advice is just one of the deluges of information that officials have to contend with. What is lacking, many authors feel, is an adequate organization for getting balanced, informed, current, and consensual scientific advice to high levels, especially on those issues, questions, and problems where officials may not recognize the need for advice in advance.

After technical triumphs helped the Allies end World War II, most of the scientists who worked in the war effort were glad to go home. The Korean War reminded President Truman that the military still needed high-quality scientific assistance. In mid-1950, Truman called on William T. Golden, the progenitor of this volume. Golden was then a young former Wall Street securities analyst, the inventor of a gunnery training device while a World War II naval officer, and a public servant. Golden interviewed 150 people in government, industry, and academic life. In December 1950 he recommended to Truman "the appointment of an outstanding scientific leader as Scientific Advisor to the President." Truman quickly approved. In 1957, following Sputnik, President Eisenhower appointed the first full-time presidential science adviser, James R. Killian, Jr., and created the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC), as Golden had recommended.

From 1951 to 1973, independent scientific and technological advice flowed to the president of the United States primarily through channels Golden designed. In 1973, PSAC's independence became a political liability for President Nixon. PSAC opposed his policies on the anti-ballistic missile and the supersonic transport, and certain of its members publicized their opposition. Nixon abolished PSAC and the post of presidential science adviser.

In 1976, Congress created the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) in the Executive Office of the President to replace the apparatus Nixon dismantled. President Ford eventually appointed a science adviser to head OSTP, but did not appoint a PSAC. None of his successors has re-created PSAC or its equivalent. The need for high-quality scientific and technical advice is growing. This year, about $125 billion will be spent in the United States for scientific research and development (90 percent of it outside of universities) and, according to William O. Baker, nobody seems to know just what results that money buys. What to do? This book gives President George Bush more options than the menu of a Chinese restaurant.

Some veterans of the good old days have a simple solution: Give the president's science adviser direct access to the president again and re-create PSAC. Alternative suggestions abound. Make the president's science adviser a member of the cabinet without portfolio. Create a Department of Science. Give more resources to OSTP. Get the National Science Board to provide more leadership. Decentralize scientific advising. Create a private advisory group for the president. Reinforce public advisory institutions, such as the National Research Council. Get scientists to work in



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# Memoirs from Georgia

## First Acts
A Memoir
*B. L. Reid*

In *First Acts*, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer B. L. Reid tells his own story of coming of age in America in the years after World War I, of a childhood lived in both country and city, of a poverty forgotten in the joys of prowling the woods with a slingshot and relieved in the pleasure of reading.

"A fascinating account of what it was like to grow up in a 'shabby-genteel' Southern family in the years from the Great Depression to the end of World War II. . . . Reid's agreeable prose style captures the essence and flavor of the times" —*New York Times Book Review*.

"Told with self-effacing humor and the wisdom of hindsight, this crystal-clear memoir is the record of a 'Southern boy's' growth in moral vision" —*Publishers Weekly*.

*14 photographs* $16.95

## Mixed Blessings
An Almost Ordinary Life in Hitler's Germany
*Heinz R. Kuehn*

"An affecting memoir. . . . What made Kuehn 'almost ordinary' was that he was half-Jewish and half-Catholic in a land where either half might be sufficient for condemnation. Instead, Kuehn was able to mix into the society, having been granted one of those ghastly Nazi designations: 'Mixed Breed of the First Degree.' . . . An artfully written work that depicts a life lived quietly within the drama of battles and politics" —*Kirkus*.

"Splendid. . . . I have read nothing like it on this crucial period of German history. It is a work of true literary standing"—Joseph Epstein.

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## Spellbound
Growing Up in God's Country
*David McKain*

Set in the 1940s and 1950s between the steep slopes of the Allegheny Mountains, David McKain's story of growing up in "God's Country" weaves together a boy's years of undisciplined discovery and the often harsh, sometimes beautiful fabric of a working-class Pennsylvania town.

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"A quintessentially American story. It reminds us from what unlikely and even oppressive beginnings productive American lives so often have emerged" —*Washington Post*.

"A book of tremendous power and superb accomplishment"—*Los Angeles Times*. $18.95

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political campaigns so that they know the candidates personally. Get scientists to run for office. And so on.

Congress and the judiciary receive only minor attention in the book. Congress has several sources of scientific and technical advice, including the Office of Technology Assessment, the Congressional Research Service, and Congressional Science Fellows. But the orphan of science advising is the judiciary. Here, too, the recommendations vary. Simplify laws to reduce judges' dependence on scientific expertise. Recruit as law students more people who have been working scientists. Give judges short courses in the evaluation of scientific information and scientists. Create a public agency to evaluate the methodological soundness of the scientific and technical studies that courts use.

To my taste, one of the most appealing dishes of this vast menu comes from Eli Ginzberg, a retired professor of Columbia University: "The more urgent and continuing challenges appear to me to lie less in . . . reforming . . . the federal government and more in raising the literacy of the American people and the press about matters scientific." James Madison said it best: "A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." Candidates for elected office, government executives, lawmakers, judges, and ordinary citizens, including scientists, should read this book as if their lives, or their children's, depend on solving the problems it raises.

## Beautiful Truth, Truthful Beauty

TRUTH AND BEAUTY: AESTHETICS AND MOTIVATIONS IN SCIENCE. *By S. Chandrasekhar. University of Chicago Press. $23.95.*

Reviewed by JIM HOLT

Truth, beauty, goodness abide, these three. Scientists are supposed to pursue the first, artists the second, and all of us—since it requires no special aptitudes—the third. Yet some scientists are unhappy with this division of labor. It seems to leave them with a less lofty motive than the artists: the desire for truth, after all, goes by the name of curiosity, whereas beauty is said to awaken love. Then there is the old Bacon saw, "Knowledge is power," with its insinuation of an ulterior purpose, not to mention the taint of usefulness.

As scientists go, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, the author of *Truth and Beauty*, has little truck with the useful; nor is he likely to be accused of harboring an excessive will to power. When Chandrasekhar was awarded the Nobel Prize in physics in 1983, the Swedish Academy singled out his research into the death throes of large stars—something humans will probably never have a great deal of influence over. Chandrasekhar was born in Lahore, India (now Pakistan), in 1910. He came to Cambridge to earn a Ph.D. in theoretical physics, and while still in his early twenties derived the "relativistic degeneracy formula" that prepared the way for the discovery of those unfathomable singularities in space-time known as black holes. For this achievement he was ridiculed by the great English astrophysicist Sir Arthur Eddington, who referred to his scenario for the collapse of stars exceeding 1.44 solar masses (a threshold now called the "Chandrasekhar limit") as "stellar buffoonery," and implied that his formula, based as it was on a union of relativity theory and quantum mechanics, was a scientific bastard. As Eddington's strictures did not enhance the young Indian's chances for tenure in Britain, Chandrasekhar left for the United States. Since 1938 he has been at the University of Chicago, where he has done important work in such diverse areas as stellar dynamics, hydromagnetics, and the theory of radiative transfer.

In *Truth and Beauty* Chandrasekhar sets forth his case that the scientist is every bit as implicated in the quest for beauty as the artist, the poet, or the composer. His book consists of seven occasional lectures, one delivered in 1946, the rest over the last dozen years. They fall into two groups. The first four deal generally with the role of aesthetics in scientific inquiry and can be followed by anyone with a nodding acquaintance with science. The other three, though sprinkled with anecdotal paragraphs, are largely technical and will be tough going for those without a rigorous back-

✪ JIM HOLT is a columnist for the *Literary Review* (London).



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ground in physics. One lecture surveys the work of the astrophysicist Edward Arthur Milne, another that of Eddington—whom Chandrasekhar graciously refers to as "the most distinguished astrophysicist of his time"—and the last is a daunting effort to explain how Einstein's theory of general relativity meets certain formal criteria of beauty.

Perhaps the least controvertible point made in these lectures is that scientists often take aesthetic delight in their work. Chandrasekhar cites plenty of personal avowals by great scientists that this indeed is so. Werner Heisenberg (of uncertainty principle fame), for instance, describes the moment quantum mechanics finally became clear to him as a veritable beatific vision. Chandrasekhar tells of his own rapture at realizing that "Einstein's equations of general relativity . . . provide the *absolutely exact representation* of untold numbers of massive black holes that populate the universe."

As though to leave no doubt that these are genuine experiences of beauty, Chandrasekhar quotes one mathematician who says that he gets much the same thrill from a certain theorem discovered by the Indian prodigy Ramanujan as he does from the Michelangelo sculptures in the Medici Chapel (a photo of the Medici tomb can be found overleaf from the equation in case the reader would like to check this point for himself). But such farfetched comparisons are not really necessary to clinch the author's point. If we go by Aquinas's characterization of beauty as that of which the *apprehensio ipsa* pleases—or by the similar eighteenth-century notion that the mark of beauty is disinterested delight—then what these scientists are encountering is, by definition, the beautiful.

Chandrasekhar does not, however, confine himself to the claim that aesthetic delight is a fringe benefit of, and a spur to, scientific inquiry—he goes on to assert that it is a *goal* of science: "In the arts as in the sciences, the quest is after the same elusive quality: beauty." This goes down less easily, since it seems to put the scientist at the service of two masters. How is he to proceed when beauty and truth conflict?

Some, of course, will deny that these two ideals can ever be at odds. Their motto might be the inscription on Keats's urn, which—inevitably—Chandrasekhar quotes. Now, the idea that truth and beauty are in some sense the same thing is not really so preposterous. Suppose your aesthetic creed happens to be Renaissance classicism, and you believe that a human creation is beautiful insofar as it is a just representation of a noble subject. Then you would have to say that the scientist, in seeking to draw an accurate picture of nature in the medium of mathematics, is tracking beauty whether he knows it or not. Perhaps, however, you reject this mimetic view of beauty and plump instead for a formal characterization—say, the seventeenth-century neoclassical notion of beauty as uniformity-in-variety. Then the scientist, whose pursuit of truth is ultimately a matter of getting particular facts to hang together in a neat logical network, once again cannot help but aim at beauty. Finding uniformity in variety is precisely what Kepler did when he subsumed the vast and meticulous observations of Tycho Brahe under three concise laws of planetary motion. And, it is quite obviously what Leon M. Lederman, the director of the Fermi Institute, had in mind recently when he said that the goal of physics was "to explain the entire universe in a single, simple formula that you can wear on your T-shirt."

Chandrasekhar's own aesthetic makes the link between truth and beauty more ambiguous. Beauty, he says, has two aspects: "the proper conformity of the parts to one another and to the whole" and "strangeness in proportion." (The first of these, which he takes from Heisenberg, is actually a somewhat watered-down version of the classical Greek concept of symmetry; the second comes from Francis Bacon.) The problem with Chandrasekhar's analysis is that it contains terms—"proper," "conformity," "strangeness"—as contentious as the idea of beauty itself. Fortunately, Chandrasekhar illustrates his dual criterion by applying it to Einstein's theory of general relativity. The lecture is difficult, but the nub of it is that the beauty of general relativity arises from "the harmonious coherence of its mathematical structure."

Only a scientific philistine would deny that general relativity, which explains gravitation by the curvature of space-time, displays great mathematical elegance. But aesthetic complaints are beginning to be voiced about the so-called Standard Model that accounts for the workings of the other three fundamental



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forces in nature—the strong and weak nuclear forces, and electromagnetism. Not only does it involve a messy profusion of particles and a host of seemingly arbitrary constants, it fails to unify the strong force with the other two and leaves out gravity altogether. Such a theory can hardly be thought of as the outcome of an aesthetic quest, yet it works just fine. Truth seems to have diverged from beauty.

Not that the author rules this possibility out. He cites a remark made by the great physicist and polymath Hermann Weyl: "My work always tried to unite the true with the beautiful; but when I had to choose one or the other, I usually chose the beautiful." Chandrasekhar hastens to add, however, that once when Weyl thought he was sacrificing truth to beauty—by developing his gauge theory of gravitation even after he became convinced of its empirical falsity—the decision was later justified in the court of truth by the surprising usefulness of the gauge formalism in theoretical physics over the last two decades.

The moral Chandrasekhar draws is that, although beauty and truth may on occasion lead in somewhat different directions, the one is still a reliable *guide* to the other, especially when hard data are scant or even nonexistent. This conclusion, weaker than the claim that beauty is a goal of scientific inquiry, seems to be borne out by the way in which the empirically blind use of mathematical symmetry has repeatedly yielded theoretical innovations confirmed years later by powerful particle accelerators. Yet the conclusion raises a deep question: why should elegant theories be more probable than ugly ones?

Various answers suggest themselves. One is theological: the universe was created by a God who ever geometrizes (or arithmetizes, depending on which you think is more divine). Another answer, Kantian in flavor, holds that the preference for the beautiful over the ugly lies not in nature but in our minds: cognitive finitude compels us to project harmony and simplicity onto the world in order to make sense of it.

Chandrasekhar's own explanation is Plato with a dash of Jung. The idea is that lurking in the human unconscious are certain emotionally charged archetypes corresponding in a pre-established way to patterns in the natural world; when the scientist recognizes the correspondence he is struck dumb with delight. The trouble with this idea is that it leaves so much obscure. How do these archetypal images get into our heads? In the case of simple ideas having to do with logic, causality, and Euclidean geometry, one might suppose that Nature herself lodged them there in the course of evolution. Yet these are precisely the principles that break down in twentieth-century physics.

Although Chandrasekhar does not often pause to consider such objections to his views, he does devote an entire lecture to a skeptical matter. If scientists and artists alike quest after beauty, he says, it stands to reason that they should exhibit similar patterns of creativity over the course of their lives. Yet in practice something very different proves to be the case. Scientists almost invariably achieve their big breakthroughs in their early years and are rather barren later on. Artists, composers, and poets, by contrast, tend to get better with age, the very best really hitting their stride in their "late" period.

Chandrasekhar's examples from the arts are Beethoven and Shakespeare, whose careers he briskly and competently rehashes. These are hardly tendentious choices: if not every artist who lives beyond middle age gets so shockingly good as late Beethoven and Shakespeare, it is difficult to think of many in the first rank whose powers declined substantially in their middle or late years. (Finding exceptions makes a good parlor game. Wordsworth and Coleridge are easy; some, incredibly, cite late Picasso.)

The careers of scientists are probably less familiar to most. Chandrasekhar discusses Newton, James Clerk Maxwell, and Einstein in some detail. The case of Newton is representative. At twenty-three he discovered the differential calculus, the composition of light, and the laws of gravity; in his forty-third year he finally got around to writing it all up in the *Principia* (he had been engaged in some curious theological investigations in the meantime); then, after a nervous crisis (which Chandrasekhar does not mention), Newton withdrew from science for the last forty years of his life. The pattern of late creative sterility is just as marked among mathematicians. The Cambridge eminence G. H. Hardy called mathematics a "young man's game," and said, "I do not know of a major mathematical advance initiated by a man past fifty."



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Disappointingly, Chandrasekhar has little to say by way of explaining this discrepancy, which seems to weigh heavily against his thesis. Instead he launches into a discussion of how artists and scientists view each others' business. He notes that, whereas Wordsworth and Keats disliked science, Shelley thought rather highly of it. That may be interesting, but the reader is still wondering why scientists tire of the chase after beauty so much earlier than artists.

It might have been useful for Chandrasekhar to have considered the case of Leonardo. Here was a man who excelled at science *and* at art, who moreover—like Chandrasekhar—believed the two pursuits shared the same aim. What motivated Leonardo to shift the focus of his activity from art to science and back again at different times in his life? Freud had an explanation: Leonardo's scientific inquiries were driven by libido sublimated from infantile sexual curiosity; in his fifties—"when," says Freud, "the libido in men not infrequently ventures into an energetic rise"—a further regression sent Leonardo back to art, and he created his greatest masterpieces. Could this be a clue to the lack of interest Newton and Clerk Maxwell showed in science at that age?

But we needn't press Chandrasekhar to play the analyst. A less arcane explanation for this difference between the careers of scientists and artists emerges when one remembers that, besides formal and mimetic beauty, there is a third type, stressed by the Romantics—expressive beauty. If aesthetic merit consists in the expression of human feeling—or, less one-sidedly, in the subtle interplay of expressive and formal values—then the artist has a decided advantage over the scientist in the quest for beauty. "Percepts can be suffused with affect," as one professor put it, and so can language. But mathematics, for all its formal elegance, is ill-suited to be a vehicle of emotion. That is why people call its beauty "icy." Now, knowledge of feeling deepens and ripens as the heyday of the blood is tamed. Purely formal devices, on the other hand, grow tired with use, become effete. (Chandrasekhar himself suggests as much when he observes that great scientists often get mesmerized by their formal intuitions and led astray.) Thus we begin to see why the poet, the composer, and the painter reach


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their highest pitch of creativity when the scientist is over the hill.

Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar has omitted to mention one rather prominent exception to the above rule—himself. Changing his field of research every decade or so, Chandrasekhar has throughout his long career consistently produced results of the highest scientific importance and the deepest mathematical beauty. In these provocative lectures he also demonstrates an extraordinary grasp of expressive art—can anything less be said of a man who is devoted to Beethoven's late quartets? Clearly, when it comes to the ascent of eros toward Beauty itself, even Diotima has very little on Chandrasekhar.

## The Mighty Fallen

FORTAS: THE RISE AND RUIN OF A SUPREME COURT JUSTICE. *By Bruce Allen Murphy. Morrow. $25.*

Reviewed by JACOB A. STEIN

The general outlines of Bruce Allen Murphy's biography of Abe Fortas can be caught in a sentence of a type found in the published notebooks of Somerset Maugham or Henry James summarizing the plot of a yet-to-be-written novel. "A man commences from humble beginnings, rises quickly through academic excellence and opportunism and then when he reaches the heights, suffers moral vertigo and falls."

Abe Fortas was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1910. His father worked at odd jobs and earned very little. Despite the handicap of poverty, Fortas quickly established himself as the honor student in every class he attended. His academic superiority brought him scholarship entry to Yale Law School.

The Yale Law School brought Fortas in touch with the first of his great patrons, William O. Douglas. Douglas connected Fortas with the New Deal and placed him with the secretary of interior, Harold Ickes, who found Fortas useful and offered him a high legal position. In time Douglas persuaded Ickes to appoint Fortas, then only thirty-one, as under secretary of the Department of the Interior.

It was during this period that Fortas met his most influential patron, Lyndon B. Johnson, the newly elected congressman from Texas. Fortas and Johnson discovered that they were successful in getting things done for each other.

In time Ickes became suspicious that Fortas had interests that diverted him from his main role—increasing Ickes's fame. Fortas sensed it was time to go. In 1946 he entered the private practice of law with Thurman Arnold as his partner. Arnold often repeated that his selection of Fortas as a partner was one of the smartest decisions he, Arnold, ever made. That is quite a compliment because Thurman Arnold was quite a man.

Although Arnold did many things during a long lifetime filled with incident, his main occupation was that of a happy skeptic blessed with an original point of view on everything that touched his flammable fancy. He was born in Laramie, Wyoming. At age sixteen he left Laramie to attend Princeton University. He graduated with Phi Beta Kappa honors. He then entered the Harvard Law School and went on to practice law in Chicago until the United States entered World War I. He served in Europe as an artillery officer.

After the war Thurman Arnold returned to Laramie and the practice of law. He was elected to the Wyoming House of Representatives and also elected sheriff and mayor. He then made a remarkable jump from Laramie to the deanship of the West Virginia University Law School. He wrote prodigiously. In 1930 he accepted an appointment to the law faculty of Yale.

Thurman Arnold, like William O. Douglas, joined the New Deal. He wound up in the Department of Justice as an aggressive trust-buster. In 1943 President Roosevelt appointed him as an associate judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. Arnold soon discovered he was uncomfortable as a judge. Fortas was later to make the same discovery. The life was too restrictive. Arnold resigned from the bench in 1945 to resume the practice of law.

The new firm became known for its courageous involvement in civil liberties issues. Its most publicized case was that of Owen Latti-

✪ JACOB A. STEIN is a practicing lawyer in Washington, D.C.



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more, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, accused by Senator Joseph McCarthy of being a communist. Eventually, Arnold and Fortas obtained a dismissal of the charges against Lattimore.

The law firm also was a leader in the Washington practice. Its clients included Coca Cola, Pan-American Airways, Warner Brothers, Western Union Telegraph, the Sun Oil Company, and the American Broadcasting Company.

The years from 1946 to 1965, when he was practicing law and building an elite Washington law firm, were the golden days for Fortas. He was doing legal work of the kind he most enjoyed. He was marketing advice and good judgment to captains of industry. He was close to governmental power as a trusted advisor. His analytical powers were put to full use. He was a fine appellate advocate. He was a superb administrator and many lawyers profited greatly from their apprenticeship with him.

During these years Fortas and Arnold worked together very well, but they were entirely different personalities. Arnold was in outlook much closer to Douglas than to Fortas. Arnold, as Douglas, enjoyed a rebellious frontier spirit. He was proud of his out-West background. In addition, Arnold had something neither Fortas nor Douglas had. He was gifted with insights into law and government as original as Thorstein Veblen's in sociology and economics. Arnold's two major works, *The Folklore of Capitalism* and *The Symbols of Government*, throw a revealingly skeptical light on both government and capitalism.

The frontier spirit inclined Arnold and Douglas to be uneasy when praised by the establishment. Fortas's desire was to align himself with the powerful as a courtier. Fortas possessed in full measure the talent for playing the understudy to the powerful that is given only to the few. Chesterfield, in his letters to his son, sets the rules here. Chesterfield perhaps could have learned a few things from Fortas, but one of the rules is to never drop the mask. In other times Fortas would have been a Talleyrand, a Richelieu, a Castiglione. He knew how to find occasions to be employed in the secret affairs of the prince and to be consulted in business of the greatest trust. His was the art of worldly wisdom that rests on the firm belief that it is unwise to leave anything to chance or to rely on an expectation that gratitude plays a significant part in human affairs.

The careers of both Fortas and Johnson were given an electric shock when President Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson became president. Johnson called on Fortas continuously and Fortas gave Johnson undivided loyalty. Johnson chose to repay Fortas by placing him on the Supreme Court. In his biography, Bruce Allen Murphy alleges that Fortas had no desire to be on the Court and that Johnson tricked him into it.

Once on the Court Fortas was reluctant to confine his interests to the work of the Court alone. He continued to meet with President Johnson and give advice on a wide range of questions and issues. This was used by Fortas's enemies when Johnson nominated Fortas as Chief Justice. Furthermore, other things came out. Fortas had accepted an American University lectureship financed by clients of his law firm. Murphy has collected and presented in an orderly fashion all the details surrounding the opposition to Fortas and how men of power manipulated each other.

When it became clear that opposition to his nomination as Chief Justice could not be overcome, Fortas withdrew but remained on the Court as an associate justice. The fight brought forth information that made Fortas vulnerable for other attacks. When Johnson decided not to run for re-election, Fortas's future became cloudy. Nixon won the presidency, and he was determined to take control of the Court. He needed Fortas's seat.

It was learned that Fortas had accepted money from a foundation connected with Louis Wolfson, then head of Montgomery Ward, Inc., who was under investigation by several branches of government. The money involved was relatively modest, and Fortas tried to disengage by returning the money. But Fortas, the man whose judgment was invaluable to others, had delivered himself up to his enemies, adventurers now in the ascendancy. Richard M. Nixon and John N. Mitchell intimidated Fortas into resigning from the Court. Here again Murphy presents all the evidence, documentary, anecdotal, and circumstantial.

Fortas would live to see Nixon and Mitchell fall from the heights because of their own unexpected lapses of judgment. When Nixon and Mitchell tried to intimidate Justice Dou-



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glas because Douglas also had accepted money from a foundation, it did not work. Douglas took pleasure in defiance, a role Fortas could not play.

After resigning, Fortas re-entered private practice, but he was unwelcome at his old firm. In a few years he was dead at age seventy-two.

One gets no clear impression of Fortas the man from Mr. Murphy's biography. The book is more in the nature of a graph that, for dramatic effect, plots an abrupt and seemingly effortless rise and then the abrupt plunge downward. Apparently Murphy had no access to personal letters or diaries, if any survive. It will take a novelist to round out the picture of someone such as Fortas, who disclosed his real self to very few.

A personal comment or two for possible use by a novelist. I met Fortas on a number of occasions. He gave the appearance of someone who had been an athlete. He was self-confident and knew he had the power to charm. His countenance was calm and quiet and his mind ever alert and restless. He was deliberate of speech with a disarming southern accent. Women found him attractive. He enjoyed music and participated as a violinist in a regular Sunday quartet. He was loyal and helpful to his friends.

Murphy, in the chapter entitled "The Last Days of Abe Fortas," includes an excerpt from a eulogy by William J. Brennan, Jr., a Supreme Court colleague. Brennan remembered Fortas as being "among those rare individuals possessed of the energy and ability to forge several distinguished careers in one lifetime. . . . The work, career and character of this scholarly, gentle, quiet spoken and unfailingly courteous man exemplified the judicial role at its best. He richly earned the high respect in which he was held by all who were privileged to know him."

Character testimony such as this from such an impressive character as Justice Brennan helps put into balance evaluations of this complex man who left an unforgettable and favorable imprint on a number of discerning and morally perceptive witnesses.

Neither Fortas nor anyone else doubted Fortas's intelligence. He showed whatever side was appropriate to his objective. This is not necessarily an immoral stance. Arthur Krock, for many years the Washington correspondent of the *New York Times*, witnessed the repeated downfall of high government people, whose brief authority ended with allegations of influence seeking and influence peddling. Krock, in his memoirs, speculated on why Sherman Adams, Eisenhower's chief of staff, and Harold E. Talbott, Eisenhower's secretary of the air force, wounded themselves by questionable conduct. Adams became careless in his relations with an obvious influence peddler and accepted trivial gifts from the man. Talbott used air force stationery to urge corporate heads to avail themselves of the services of Talbott's former business partners.

Krock held that these men, as many before them, were destroyed by arrogance amplified by excessive egotism. Each believed he was incorruptible because he knew what was wise and sensible and thus felt no need to offer explanations to his inferiors. Krock's diagnosis may well apply to Fortas and those who will follow, administration after administration.

It is dangerous for courtiers to assume an open position of power. The courtier serves best in the shadows. The full blaze of light when focused on him may blind him and cause him to stumble and fall.

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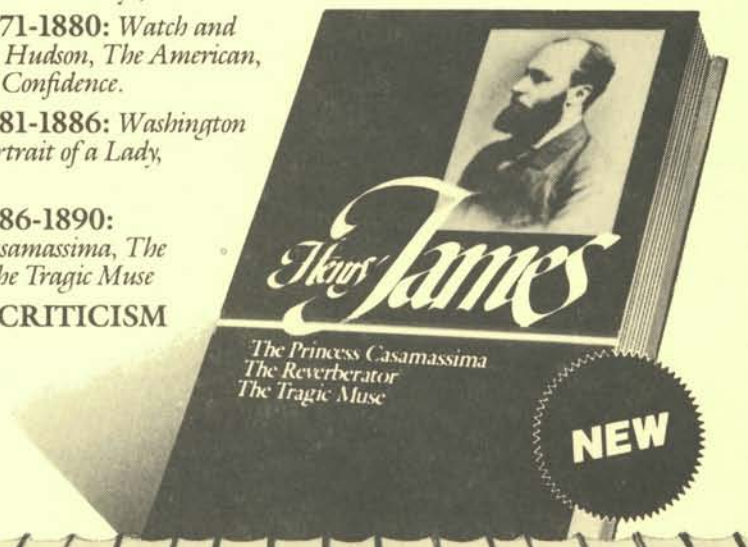

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